



\$2.50 a year.

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November 29, 1881.

No. 107. VOL. V. PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS, 98 WILLIAM ST., N. Y. PRICE, 5 CENTS

Poor Zeph!

BY F. W. ROBINSON.

CHAPTER I.

THE GRANDISON ROOMS.

THEY were rooms that had seen better days and known better company. Time had been when society patronized the Grandison Rooms, and folk whom the world knew, and whom Court Guides recognized, came to classical concerts and evening conversaziones here, and drove away again weary and depressed. When fashion drifted further west, and larger rooms in more brilliant thoroughfares took all the shine that was left from the Grandison, the neighborhood became shady and dubious by degrees, and the poor old stucco edifice in Frisk Street, Soho, grew more shady and dubious to match. Everybody came to grief who speculated in the Grandison, because nobody would come to see everybody's entertainment, no matter of what its merits might consist. Dioramas collapsed by scores at the Grandison Rooms, which were the home, or rather the family vault, of dioramas for many long-suffering years, concluding with the tragic episode of a bankrupt exhibitor blowing his brains out one morning over the grand piano which a relentless lessee had impounded. Private theatricals had a turn at the Grandison Rooms, and failed to secure an audience; an organ-builder lost his money and his head over them; a furniture emporium sprang to light here, and went suddenly out again, with all the furniture of the depository; finally, a man who had been a publican, and had relations in the ballet, started the Grandison as a dancing academy, and, to the amazement of the neighbors, held his ground for years, and in the face of much scandal and ill report and enmity, existed after his own small fashion upon the profits of his speculation. The Grandison Rooms became something more than the shadow of a name again, although society had turned its back on them forever. Knowing clerks about town, lively young Jews and Jewesses with Saturday evenings to themselves, skittish milliners and dressmakers from the large establishments in the vicinity, the drapers' young men, the French hair-dressers and French waiters and cooks for which Soho is famous, all knew the Grandison, spent their hardly earned money there, and kicked up their heels to a wheezy band of four which played dance music in a little gallery. The Grandison had no dancing license, but evaded the law with a cleverness that reflected credit on Smiles, the proprietor, who, report said, had not always been success-

ful in dodging that great institution, but had bought his experience dearly once or twice. The Grandison was ostensibly and simply a dancing academy, where it was supposed that only annual subscribers were allowed to introduce their friends, who paid eightpence for the privilege on quadrille nights, which were three a week in the winter season, and well attended as a rule. Smiles did his best to keep the Grandison a select establishment, it must be asserted. Disreputability in silks and satins had flaunted its way thither, and been told politely that it could not be admitted on any pretense whatever; and the fast man—that is, the man who had come for a lark, and failing in his lark, had gone in for a row—had been quickly pitched into the street or handed over to the policeman at the first sign of his overstepping the bounds of that propriety for which the Grandison aimed to be distinguished. There was no dancing in hats or bonnets at the Grandison; no smoking allowed save in the gentlemen's room up stairs, where report said card-playing had been seen at times for a trifle more than nominal stakes. There was no boisterous fun, shrill laughter or unseemly actions; nothing save the light and airy flirtations patent to all dancing shops, high or low, and a trifle more evident at the Grandison, where life was distraction and reaction from a day's hard labor. The academy was considered a proper place by its *habitués*, who behaved themselves creditably, danced vigorously, and perspired much for eightpence, going steadily through the programme with a fixed intention to have their money's worth. Men of the Cremorne and Argyle types, scouts from the grand army of prowlers, dropped in now and then, but voted the whole thing slow, and went away again as from a place of entertainment beyond their comprehension.

There were two strangers puzzled in this way in the month of April of two years ago. Attracted by the noise from the open windows, they had paused in the street to listen, had asked a few questions of the aborigines, had gone in laughing and jesting at their adventure, and were now standing at the door of the shabby ball-room looking curiously and critically at the dancers, who regarded them as intently in their turn.

"Swells," whispered the girls, and "Stuck-ups," muttered the men, whose attention had been arrested.

"An odd lot this, Frank," commented the elder stranger—a grave, almost stern-looking man of five and twenty.

"Wait a moment or two, Dudley," was the reply of a handsome young fellow, faintly flushed with wine, for he and his friend had been dining heavily; "this is a novelty and amuses me."

"Giddy folk are easily amused," said the other, sententiously.

"I am not giddy," said the first.

"You are young, and life bewilders you," said the second.



THE END HAD COME, AND THEY HAD SAID GOOD-BYE. HE WAS NEVER TO MEET HER AGAIN.

"The working classes in their best clothes."

"Respectable?"

"I should say so—most of them," added Dudley, with a reserve.

"The girls are tolerable, but the men are dreadful," muttered the younger man, still proceeding with his criticism.

"Ah, yes," said Dudley, wearily, "that's the general rule. How long do you think of remaining?"

"A quarter of an hour or so, if you don't mind. This is what the world would call a spree, Dudley."

"I don't quite see it. I will go into that ante-room and wait for you," said Dudley, wearily. "It may be possible to get seltzer there."

"Stop and see the dancing," urged the other, greatly interested in the scene. "By Jove, they are enjoying themselves at this crib. Dowager Lady Bareblades should see this, old boy!"

Dudley laughed, but strolled toward the apartment on the other side of the staircase and away from the ball-room. It was a refreshment-room of humble pretensions, with low long tables on which were biscuits and oranges, with a counter at the extremity where coffee and lemonade were in reserve. There was a lovers' quarrel going on at the table next to Dudley, and Dudley, a student of human nature, sat and observed this after ordering his sherry and seltzer of a dilapidated waiter. The lovers were at high words; the course of true love had not run smoothly that particular evening; there had been flirtation at work, and jealousy had been the consequence, and now the weaker vessel was "catching it."

"I told you yesterday not to dance with him," muttered the man, angrily.

"What was I to do?"

"Wait for me."

"I did wait till the last minute—I was not going to lose my dance," said the girl, sharply. "You should have made haste if you wanted me for your partner."

"I couldn't come before the governor let me off," cried the aggrieved man. "What's the use of talking such foolery as that?"

"Foolery!" exclaimed the girl.

"Yes, foolery. What else do you call it?" was the blunt rejoinder.

"Very well, Ben. You don't dance with me any more to-night."

"Oh! I can find plenty of other girls, if that's your game," he said.

"Find them," cried the girl, "and welcome."

"Damme—I will, too. I won't be served like this. I'll go and dance my hardest," and Ben sprang up like a bomb-shell.

"Go—and joy go with you," said the girl, saucily.

Ben, a beetle-browed, unamiable young man with a pasty complexion, marched away from his lady-love and passed into the ball-room without a backward glance at her whom he had taken to task. Dudley regarded the girl attentively after her lover's departure. Had she gone too far with her humble but irritable swain, and was she sorry for it? There was a thoughtful expression on her face for an instant, and then she laughed pleasantly and unaffectedly to herself, as at a jest that pleased her.

"You don't seem very deeply distressed at that young man's desertion of you," remarked Dudley, suddenly. The words escaped him before he had time to think—even if he had been disposed to think of the matter at all. There was no impropriety in addressing a young woman at a dancing establishment—there was no harm meant—and he was an inquisitive man, and interested. The girl turned toward the speaker, somewhat surprised at his sudden salutation, but not embarrassed by it. An urgent need for formal introductions at the Grandison on a quadrille night had been never clearly apparent.

"Distressed!" not I, indeed," she said, with a toss of her head.

"He's very angry," remarked Dudley, with mock solemnity.

"He'll cool down quick enough. I've known my gentleman before to-night," she replied, with another toss of her head.

"Used to his little tempers, then?"

"I should think I was!"

"It might be wise to apologize," said Dudley, dryly.

"Me apologize—to him! Me!" cried the girl, taking his words in sober earnest, he spoke so seriously and looked so gravely at her. "I'll pay him out for this presently, see if I don't."

"Ah! I'm afraid I shall not be here to see the fun."

"No—really," said the girl, amused that any one should think of quitting the Grandison before the last galop had been played and the fiddlers had packed up their instruments. She regarded her interrogator more attentively, and noticed that he was better dressed and better gloved, and altogether a different kind of being from the men who came to Frisk Street. She saw, in fact, that this was a swell, that he was in full dress, with a button-hole worth three-and-six-pence in his light coat, and with things in his shirt front that shone like gold, and perhaps were made of it—who could tell? She became suddenly reserved, as if conscious that he had been "chaffing" her, and was probably vexed with herself that in her excitement and petulance she had not detected more quickly his badinage. The sudden change of manner was a new surprise to Dudley, and added to his amusement; and then there gradually dawned on his comprehension also the fact that the girl was singularly beautiful. It had not struck him earlier; he had been interested in her manner rather than in herself; but the fact was very patent to him now that here, under other circumstances, was a face that a painter might love to copy, a poet to rave about, a sculptor to immortalize in marble. He was only five-and-twenty, and could appreciate beautiful faces in women, for all the hard dry studies which had kept him stern, and dull, and steady, to that memorable date of his life.

He was interested now, or amused, or something. He did not attempt to define his feelings, but the sudden reserve exhibited by his companion puzzled him, and even pleased him. In his own circle, and when in high spirits, he had been told by fair women once or twice that he was "an aggravating fellow," "a tease," and he drifted into his teasing mood as though this little girl was one of his "set," and it was his business to "draw her out" and give life and color to her.

It was a matter of some difficulty, for his companion only answered in monosyllables, and turned her head from him while she spoke. To an inquiry, at last, if she would take any refreshment, she answered "No," with an asperity that silenced him until the dance was over in the ball-room, and the majority of the dancers came talking and laughing into the refreshment department, and the man with whom the girl had had a few words sat down at a table opposite and glowered across at them. He had brought his partner with him into the saloon, probably to pique the young lady whom he had left there; but the experiment was a failure, and the sight of Dudley by the side of the girl he had reproved was a blow from which he did not quickly recover.

The girl began to talk to Dudley with more animation also, but her companion did not take it as a compliment, seeing the game of life pretty clearly in this instance, and feeling that he came in useful at this juncture, nothing more. Still he rattled away glibly enough, said some smart things, at which his companion laughed merrily and musically, and even clapped her hands, and the man over the way looked as if he would be glad to cut his throat.

"Zeph!" he called out at last, peremptorily, "come and sit here."

"Thank you, Ben," was the curt reply, "I am quite comfortable where I am."

"You had better stay there, then," he grunted forth.

"I mean to, as long as I choose," she answered back, defiantly.

Dudley began to think he was in the way, and hardly doing the correct thing in rousing the ire of the pale-faced man opposite; he would have said, "good-night," and gone away, had not the jealous man directed public attention to him by some remark which did not reach his ears, but which set half a dozen greasy-looking youths into a roar of laughter. After that Dudley resolved to remain and to make himself at home, and show to

all whom it might concern that he was not to be scoffed off the premises.

"Your young man is getting jealous," he said to the girl.

"He's not my young man," was the quick answer.

"Didn't you tell me he was?"

"You know I didn't."

"Well, he's next door to it," said Dudley; "he would be if you cared to have him."

"Oh! that's another thing," said the girl, laughing heartily again as she looked at Dudley, who thought he had never encountered such deep blue eyes, and with so much liquid light in them. Yes, this was a very pretty young woman; and she was aware of the fact. She was different from any young woman whom he had met before, too; he wished this straightforward, blunt style of reply was fashionable in his circle; it would save a deal of trouble and misunderstanding, and people would jog along the better for it.

"What is he?" he asked.

"He's a plumber and gas-fitter," she replied. "His father keeps a shop at the corner of Edwin Street, you know."

"Ah, yes, a very good shop," said Dudley, as though he had known the neighborhood and the business all his life; "and Ben helps his father?"

"That's it."

"And Ben will presently come into the business, and marry you, Zeph, and that's the end of the love story."

"Don't call me Zeph, if you please," said his companion, with a sudden exhibition of dignity that would have discomfited most men.

"Why not?" he replied innocently—far too innocently for Frisk Street. "That is your name, is it not?"

"You have no right to call me by it, if it is."

"I don't know any other."

"And you won't either."

"Won't I?"

"No, that you won't."

"We shall see."

There was a pause, and then Dudley said thoughtfully:

"Zeph is a very odd name."

"I am sorry you don't like it," said Zeph, in the same pert tone—"awfully sorry."

"But I do like it."

"I dare say you do. Oh, yes."

Zeph laughed merrily again, and looked across at Ben, who ground his teeth together and swore profanely, and wondered what they both were talking about, and cursed them both, especially the man in the dress-coat and gloves, and with a fignal flower in his button-hole. Curse him? Yes, certainly; with the greatest satisfaction in life.

"What is Zeph short for?" Dudley asked.

"I shan't tell you."

"I wish you would," he urged. "I am really curious; upon my honor."

She seemed to give way, as his tone became more earnest.

"Oh! well then, Zephyrina, if you must know," she answered. "And now don't bother me any more about it."

"Am I bothering you?"

"Yes."

"Shall I go away?"

"Yes. You are off to a party, I suppose?" she asked, a little curiously, in her turn.

"I was thinking about it. I am not quite certain I shall go."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Ah! you haven't taken all that trouble to dress for nothing. And that fine flower, too?"

"You may have that."

"May I?" and Zeph's eyes sparkled with pleasure for a moment, and then were suddenly veiled by her long lashes. "Oh, no, thank you," she added, the instant afterward.

"You will not have it?" he inquired.

"No, thank you; I would rather not."

"You don't like flowers?"

"Yes, I do."

"You don't think Ben would like you to accept it?"

"It doesn't matter to me what Ben likes," she replied.

"There! he is off with his young lady again."
 "A pretty young lady she is! there isn't a scrap of a lady about her. I know her and her great red hands. Just look at them."

"They are a trifle red," observed Dudley.
 "Perhaps it's the weather."

"Or the scrubbing-brush. I always thought she was a servant," said Zeph, almost vindictively.

"Yes, you are jealous," Dudley remarked.

"Upon my word and honor, I ain't," said Zeph.

"You know you are fond of little Benjamin," said Dudley, in so reproving and quaint a tone that Zeph laughed merrily, and this time unaffectedly.

"I like your style," she said, sarcastically, at last.

"Meaning you dislike my impudence?"

"Perhaps I do. Why don't you go to your party?" cried Zeph. "Your swell friends will be advertising for you presently."

"I am very comfortable here thank you."

"You don't look it."

"I am waiting to see you dance," said Dudley.

"Don't know that I shall dance any more," was the answer.

"Why not?"

"Can't say. Perhaps because I can't find any partners while you sit here jawing to me."

This was very frank, amazingly frank, but excessively inelegant. It jarred upon the susceptibilities of Dudley, and he shuddered until he caught sight of her face, fair, fresh, young, and full of the happiness of life's beginning—a face looking innocently out at the world yet, and knowing nothing and guessing but little of the world's temptations. Surely not eighteen years of age, this bright girl, in whom his interest was not growing less, who puzzled him and bewildered him by her originality and piquancy.

"How do you know I am not going to ask you to favor me with your hand for this waltz?" asked Dudley, in reply to her.

"Oh, yes; you are sure to dance."

"What is to hinder me?"

"You are much too fine. You wouldn't like to mix with all the people you see here."

"You are very much mistaken."

"Oh, I know," said Zeph, laughing again. "We have had one or two of you gents before, but they never dance."

"But I will, if you will accept me for a partner," said Dudley, positively.

Out came her favorite word again in her surprise.

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"But—"

"Will you have me or not?" he said, impatiently.

"Yes, I don't mind."

"Come along, then."

Dudley had taken off his overcoat, pitched it into a corner, and was now moving down the room with Zeph on his arm. At the door his friend Frank was standing, and he pushed him lightly aside.

"Out of the way, you wall-flower!" he exclaimed.

"By Jove!—what—Dudley!" cried his friend, and before Frank had recovered from his astonishment, Dudley and Zeph were whirling round the ball-room together at a double-quick speed. It was a wild waltz while it lasted, but before they were tired the music had ceased.

"Bother," said Zeph, "how soon."

"Never mind, we'll go in for the next, whatever it is," said Dudley, rashly. "Is it a bargain?"

"I don't mind," answered Zeph, very graciously.

She was in high spirits now, and secretly proud of her partner, though he was not vain enough to guess that for himself. They promenaded in the ball-room with the other couples, and Zeph laughed and nodded to her various acquaintances, and exchanged "good-evenings" and "how d'ye do's" with some of the most extraordinary specimens of mankind whom Dudley thought he had ever seen in his life.

"Do you come here very often?" he asked, suddenly and almost sadly.

"Twice a week sometimes—always on a Saturday," replied Zeph. "I can get out best on that day, of course."

"Why of course?"

"Because business closes earlier, to be sure."

"May I ask what your business is?"

"I am just out of my apprenticeship to the millinery," Zeph answered, frankly. "Are you very much shocked?"

"Not at all. What would the world be without milliners?"

"Ah! what indeed?"

"Have you a father and mother?"

"Well, you are a cure for questions! I have a father. The mother," she added, becoming suddenly grave, "is dead."

"I am sorry I asked," said Dudley, very earnestly. "You must not mind what I say."

"I don't much. Still, mother has not been dead so long, that"—And here she came to a full stop, and dashed something quickly from her eyes.

"This is not a bad-sized room," Dudley hastened to say, after an awkward silence.

"No—and they are taking their places for the next dance."

"What dance is it?"

"The Lanciers."

"Oh, Lord!" muttered Dudley.

Still the Lanciers it was, and he fought bravely through it, and laughed, and talked, and made himself agreeable to the members of his particular set of eight, and was called "old chap" and "mate" by one or two friendly souls of his own sex, and clasped vigorously at "corners" by agile young beings of the opposite sex, and enjoyed his dance with Zeph as well as it was possible under the circumstances. He was more interested than ever in this little girl; she seemed above the rest of her class here, too good, and pretty, and pure, to run the gauntlet of all these grimy young Hebrews and Christian cads without gloves, these leering, nowling, queer-looking beasts who called her Zeph—he heard half a dozen of them address her by her Christian name.

"You let your favorites call you Zeph, I see."

"Yes—when they know me."

"Perhaps I shall be a favorite some day," he said, lightly.

"I don't think that's very likely," she answered, lightly too.

"Why not?"

"Well, the coolness of you!" she said. "That's a good one. You won't come here again, I know that."

"There's no telling what may happen," was Dudley's reply. "But I don't think I shall come very often."

"No, I suppose not."

"I wish you did not come."

"Why not?" asked the girl, very much surprised now.

"You might do better than come here," said Dudley. "You will pardon me for saying this on so early an acquaintance; but these rooms are hardly a fit place for a young girl."

"It's respectable—you can't say a word against it!" she said, indignantly. "There's more gents here than you."

"I should be sorry to think ill of the Grandison; but you come alone."

"Very often. I find plenty of friends when I get here."

"And plenty of friends to see you home?" he asked, meaningly.

"Ben puts me in an omnibus generally—that's all."

"Lucky Ben!"

They went back into the refreshment-room, where Zeph condescended, on this occasion, to take a glass of port-wine (far ruddier than the cherry that logwood decoction was) at her partner's expense, and to sit with him at the table again at which he had first made her acquaintance. Here Frank came up, looking almost angry at his friend's neglect of him, and altogether puzzled by his friend's new style of behavior.

"Is it not time we started?" he asked, querulously.

"I am ready when you are."

"Oh, I have been ready this hour and a half," said Frank, strolling over towards the door.

"An hour and a half," said Dudley, looking at his watch; "so it is! How times flies when a fellow is happy!"

He put on his overcoat again, standing and looking down at the bright face of the girl with whom he had danced.

"Will you have this flower now," he asked, "in memory of etc.?"

"Thank you."

He took it from his button-hole and placed it in her hand, and she looked up at him half archly, half thoughtfully.

"Good-night, little Zeph," he said.

"Good-night, sir."

"When I see you again I shall ask you to dance with me," he said, lightly.

"Ah! when you do," she answered.

"Perhaps you don't want to see me again?"

Strange feeling! but his heart was beating more rapidly than its wont, as if in doubt about her answer.

"Oh, you haven't made yourself particularly disagreeable," she said, with her old sauciness apparent.

"Not like Ben?"

"No, not a bit like Ben," she repeated, laughingly.

"And you will not be very sorry to see me again, perhaps?"

"N—no," with affected hesitation, "not very, I think. But I can exist without you—by an effort."

He laughed himself at her manner; then the impulse came to him to tempt this light little milliner into a promise. She was very pretty, she attracted him, and he was not his old steady, grave self that night.

"I fancy I can't exist well without you," he said, in a low tone. "I should like to see you again, just for half an hour's chat, when you come from business some evening. May I?"

She looked up at him with surprise in her eyes, and a flickering color on her cheeks.

"Will you meet me," he urged, "this day week, at the corner of the street, for half an hour?—only a few minutes, if you like; but please come."

She did not answer at once.

"You are laughing at me," she said, looking down.

"No, I am not."

"Really?"

"Really; I am in earnest. Will you come?"

"Yes, I think I will," she murmured. "What time?"

"Eight."

"Very well."

"Thank you, Zeph. Good-night."

"Good-night," she responded; and long after he had gone away, proud of his small conquest—such as it was—over this vain, pretty, poor little work-girl, Zeph sat there, thinking of all that he had said, and all that she had promised in return.

CHAPTER II.

A GARDEN PARTY.

DUDLEY GREY and his friend Frank Amore went away laughing from the Grandison Rooms. They left, as they came, with a jest, and Frank Amore, a good-tempered fellow in his way, forgot speedily how long he had been kept waiting by his friend.

"You have been going it, Dudley," he said. "By Jove, I never saw you enter into the spirit of a thing of this kind before."

"It was the champagne we had at dinner, Frank."

"It was the pretty little woman with the big eyes, you hypocrite," cried Frank.

"Yes—she is pretty," said Dudley. "I was interested in a quarrel between her and her sweetheart, and so drifted into conversation afterward."

"And to two dances after that. I shall never forget those Lanciers," said Frank, with a roar that awoke the echoes of the street, "and you arm-in-arm with three carpenters, each grinning at his *vis-à-vis* before turning to places. It was a scene out of a play."

"It was droll," remarked Dudley, thoughtfully.

"What would the Bareblades say?" exclaimed Frank. "What would Geraldine think of her cavalier behaving in this extraordinary fashion at an eightpenny hop?"

"She would laugh at all eccentricities."

"Then I may tell her, Dud?"

"Certainly you may."

But Frank Amore did not mention their adventure when the two young men arrived at the residence of the Dowager Countess Bareblades, and Dudley seemed quickly to forget it in the fascinations of high-bred women and the excitement of a *soiree dansante*, with more Champagne at supper. He forgot his promise to meet this Zeph on the following Tuesday—possibly forgot Zeph altogether. At all events, he did not tell Frank how far his flirtation had extended, and Frisk Street to the younger man lay a long way off next day, and was as remote as the antipodes by that day week.

And Dudley Grey? Well, when Tuesday came, he remembered his appointment; he thought about it at the club, at his chambers in Clement's Inn, at the hospital where Frank was resident surgeon, and where he called to see Frank that morning, as briefs were scarce with him, but where he never mentioned the name of the girl that was upon his mind, despite the faint efforts that he made to shake her from it. At his club again after dinner he thought even more, and this time seriously, of the situation, shrugging his shoulders at the idea which troubled him.

"I don't mean her any harm, Heaven knows; I wouldn't do her any harm for the world," he said to himself; "but I wonder if she'll be there."

After wondering for five more minutes over his coffee, he indulged in another little soliloquy.

"I might do an impressionable girl like Zeph some good by advising her to give up that dancing den. To be sure I might;" and full of this noble resolve, Dudley Grey set forth in search of Zeph, the milliner.

He was at the corner of Frisk Street ten minutes before the time appointed; he was always a punctual man, but he never remembered being so much before his time as on this occasion. He must have walked fast, or miscalculated his distance, and those ten minutes in advance of the appointment became terribly wearisome, and exhausted all the distractions of the murky street wherein he lingered. It was a dreadful street. When it was striking eight, and there was no sign of the girl whom he had come to meet, he wished fervently he had named another and more respectable thoroughfare. People stared at him too much; the shops were commonplace, and the contents of their windows devoid of interest; a woman at the fried fish establishment opposite came to the door to inspect him thoroughly, the green-grocer's boy winked at him, as though he guessed the reason for his lingering on the curbstones; women with baskets of laundry-work ran against him at odd corners; the policeman passed him half a dozen times, and took him in from top to toe on each occasion; he felt hot and uncomfortable, and angry and out of place. By a quarter past eight, he was miserable and abject; at half past eight, he was anxious; when it was a quarter to nine he was savage; as it was striking nine by a church-clock in the distance, he turned away with some very bad words on the tip of his tongue, and marched off to his club in an unamiable mood.

He was a fool. He should have known better than to trust to the word of a silly little milliner, and let her have the laugh of him—perhaps tell her friends and acquaintances how she had "sold" the "swell" who came to the Grandison last Tuesday, and tried to trick her into an appointment with him. Yes, that was it; for as he turned out of Frisk Street he ran against the thick-set pasty-faced individual of the name of Ben, who smiled maliciously, and looked after him until he was out of sight. That was the joke and he had been the victim of it. So be it. Such is life, when a man goes out of his sphere in search of adventure, or excitement, or to do anybody a good or a bad turn. He had put himself out of his way purely for the girl's sake—to be a friend and counsellor to her—and this is how he had been rewarded for his pain! Yes, it was a good joke, but he would keep it to himself. He was glad that he had not said anything of the affair to Frank Amore. Frank would have seen the joke too clearly, and laughed unpleasantly over it.

For days afterward, however, the non-fulfillment of Zeph's promise perplexed as well as vexed

the man. Why did she not come, after all? She surely meant to come when he had asked her. Was she afraid of him? Did she see harm in him, or fear harm to herself? Did she think he would not be there, or was she going out with "pasty-face," or was she ill, or had she been unavoidably detained? He was a vain man in his quiet way—not very vain, not even known to be a vain man by his friends; but the idea occurred to him more than once that it was a remarkable thing that Zeph had not kept her word. He was surely an improvement on the Grandison cads; for what she knew he might have fallen desperately in love with her at first sight; he was a gentleman, and she was losing a chance by not coming to meet him.

All these thoughts for two or three days, crossed by the reflection that Zeph was very pretty and naïve and original—"quite a character," and he was fond of studying character—and then she melted away from the foreground of his meditations, and he drifted slowly into his own world, where Geraldine was, and where he was considered a very clever fellow, who would make a name for himself one of these fine days.

An advertisement in the newspapers took him back to his old thought. This was in the beginning of June, when he had almost forgotten Zeph and the Grandison Rooms. He read it over attentively, and laughed heartily at a new project which its perusal suggested. Frank Amore entering his chambers at that moment found him on the broad grin.

"What the deuce are you laughing at?" he asked, unceremoniously.

"Do you remember the Grandison last April, Frank?"

"To be sure."

"Look here, then. Here is the concluding chapter of that little comedy."

Frank took the paper from his friend's hands, and read:

"THE GRANDISON GARDEN PARTY.—Mr. Smiles begs to inform his friends and patrons that the annual garden party of the subscribers to the Grandison Rooms, Frisk Street, Soho, is fixed for the 10th inst., at Keston Common, near Bromley. A ball will take place in the Grandison Rooms on the evening of the same day, and form the concluding night of the season. For tickets and full particulars apply to the principal, at the rooms from 7 till 10 P. M."

"What a wind-up to the festivities of Frisk Street, Dudley!" said Frank. "Fancy meeting all those people in the broad daylight!"

"I could not fancy that at all," replied Dudley.

And yet on the 10th inst., on a bright summer day in June, it occurred to the oddly constructed mind of Dudley Grey, barrister at law, that he would take the train from Ludgate Hill and run down to Bromley for half an hour's fresh air. He was not in love with Zeph; she would have completely died out of his recollection had it not been for the advertisement concerning the garden party. He had no thought of reviving the flirtation of a couple of months back, even of speaking to her, unless she recognized him and put herself out of the way to say a word to him; he was simply curious to learn if that quaint girl were one of the party. Then he was writing a book too—though that was a secret to the world at present; and surely a medley of humanity, such as a garden party of this description would be, should give him character and incident to study. He had heard from the men who wrote books that they mixed with all kinds of people, on all kinds of occasions, and he must do the same thing, *sans ceremonie*, if he wished to put real life into the pages of his novel. So business as well as curiosity took Dudley Grey to Keston, and if he had another reason he kept it to himself.

He walked leisurely from Bromley to the Common, hesitating when he had reached that picturesque bit of landscape, and feeling half disposed to walk on swiftly into the heart of green Surrey until it was time to make for the nearest railway station and home. Then the sound of voices was borne to him on the summer wind, merry laughter and light music; and when he was standing on the bridge dividing the two lower lakes of Keston, he could see the garden party in full force on the higher ground, and be a witness to the

enjoyment of the scene, without approaching it too closely. If he had had an idea of intruding upon the company, he abandoned it at once; he was quite content to lounge away an hour in the distance, listening to the far-off music, and watching what seemed from his solitary standpoint the general happiness of the community. He would have been glad to catch a glimpse of Zeph, to see how she looked in her holiday dress and in the sunshine that glowed upon the landscape; but, after all, he was not particularly anxious about it. She was a nice little woman who would look well in anything, and he only hoped that she had found a better companion for herself than "pasty-face" that day. He smoked a cigar, and leaned against the railing of the bridge, and dropped off into a dreamy state, half torpor and half reverie, until the rippling laughter of two girls who were running through the bracken on the further bank turned his attention in a new direction. One was tall and the other stout, and both were young. They were concealing themselves from their lovers, perhaps, or glad to get from the crowd for a while and they came on swiftly through the ferns and grass and round the bend of the water's edge toward the barrister.

"Come along, Zeph; here's a little peace and quietness this way," Dudley heard the taller young woman say. "We have had enough of Ben and Charlie for the next half hour."

"I should think we had," answered Zeph; and then the girl with whom he had danced at the Grandison Rooms tripped along in white muslin like a fairy, and, followed by her companion, passed Dudley on the bridge. Both girls looked at Dudley as they hurried by—it was a habit of the Grandison girls to look about them a little—and the taller girl laughed, not too modestly, perhaps, at the grave, handsome lounge. Zeph glanced at Dudley, and tripped by in utter ignorance of her old partner, and he let her pass him, and then suddenly and impulsively cried:

"Zeph!"

The girls stopped, and the younger and prettier looked shyly from under the radiance of a hat, all maize and white silk trimming, at the gentleman who had addressed her thus familiarly.

"I have not the honor," she said, very modestly and quietly, "I—I do not remember you, really."

"It's the gentleman's fun," said the other, laughing loudly; "he heard me call you Zeph. Didn't you, now?"

"Oh, no!" answered Dudley. "I have met this young lady before, only her memory is at fault a little, and partners are numerous at the Grandison."

Zeph regarded him more intently, and then clapped her hands softly together after an old habit of hers, and smiled, half in surprise and half in recognition of him.

"I know!" she cried; "I know now. It was nearly two months ago—one Tuesday night. You danced a waltz with me."

"And the Lanciers afterward," added Dudley.

"Of course; I remember everything."

"Everything—you are quite sure?" he said, meaningly.

Zeph blushed very much, and looked away from him.

"I have not forgotten," she said. Then she faced him again, and added, "Do you live about here, in this beautiful part of the world?"

"Oh, no; I am a true Londoner," he answered.

"How strange you should be at Keston to-day!"

"Not at all."

"We have a garden party here from the Grandison," she said.

"Yes. I should not have come had I not seen the advertisement in the newspaper," he replied, very coolly.

"But you?"

"Haven't joined the party. Well—no—not at present. It is hardly likely that I shall," he added; "it is getting late, and you will be soon going homeward."

"Yes; but what did you come all this way for?" asked the curious girl.

Dudley did not answer at once, and he was surprised to find that Zeph's companion answered quickly for him, and very much to the purpose. There was no beating about the bush with Carry Saunders. She was six-and-twenty, had danced for

years at the Grandison, and knew human life tolerably well.

"What's the good of asking that silly question, Zeph?" she cried, half indignantly. "You know all about it as well as he does. You have planned this between you. You can't do me; I ain't a fool! But you might have said you were going to meet the gentleman here, though."

"I had no appointment with the gentleman. Really."

"Upon my honor she had not," added Dudley, in her defense.

"Ah! tell that to the marines," said the skeptical young woman. "I know. I see it all. Well," with another burst of laughter, "I won't tell Ben a word about it, only don't be long away, Zeph, or there will be the fat in the fire, and no mistake."

And away scuttled Carry Saunders from them, heeding not Zeph's entreaty for her to remain. Zeph turned quickly to Dudley and said:

"I will bid you good-day; I must go after her."

"I will not detain you more than a minute."

"I must go," said Zeph, in evident confusion.

"You are afraid of me, then?" he asked.

"Oh, no! It takes a great deal to frighten me," she said, with her old crispness; "but I would rather go, please."

Dudley was annoyed at the girl's anxiety to be quit of him. The vanity that was at the bottom of his heart was piqued considerably, and he said:

"You might spare me a few minutes' sober conversation, young lady, after my coming all this way in search of you."

"In search of me—really? You?" and the blue eyes opened wider and wider in their astonishment, and the fair cheeks took a deeper tinge of crimson into them.

"Yes. I thought I should like to see you again," he confessed.

"But I might not have been here, after all. It was a chance. Father did not like my coming."

"He is a wiser father than I thought he was," said Dudley, dryly; "but you have a will of your own?"

"Yes, I have."

"And there was an attraction here that you could not withstand."

"Perhaps there was—perhaps there wasn't," said she, saucily.

"Ben the beloved?"

"Ben, indeed!" and the maize and white hat was tossed to and fro with a disparaging movement that would have seriously wounded the feelings of the absent plumber.

"Well, have you enjoyed the holiday?" inquired Dudley.

"Very much. I work too hard not to enjoy being out in the country."

"You are going to the ball in the evening?"

"Of course I am."

"You'll kill yourself with pleasure, and there'll be an end of you," Dudley remarked.

"I don't care to live very long," was the strange answer; "I don't want to grow old."

"Why not?"

"Nobody will care for me when I am old."

"Ben will, if you treat Ben well," said Dudley.

Zeph stamped her foot impatiently at this further introduction of Ben's name into the discourse, and almost frowned when Dudley laughed at her vehemence.

"I wish you would not talk of Ben," she cried; "he has nothing to do with you."

"No; Heaven be praised!"

"And I haven't time to stay any longer."

"Thank you for staying at all, Zeph. May I say Zeph?" he asked.

"No, you mayn't. It's like your impudence."

"You are not angry because I came all this way to see you?" he inquired.

"You never did."

"I did, indeed."

"I ought to be very much flattered," she said, looking down. "What did you want to see me for?"

"What does a man go out of his way to see a pretty girl for, as a rule?" asked Dudley.

"I can't say," she answered, with her blue eyes sparkling; "men are such odd creatures."

"Besides, I wanted to ask you a question."

"You have asked me a dozen already."

"One more will make it a baker's dozen, then, Zeph."

"What is it?"

"Why did you not come to meet me at the corner of Frisk Street on the Tuesday following the night I saw you at the Grandison?" he inquired.

"Were you there?" she asked, curiously.

"Yes."

"Really, now?"

"Really."

She blushed, looked down, laughed, looked up at him again with a full, steady light in her eyes, and said:

"Yes."

"Why did I not meet you?"

"Because I thought afterward it was not right."

"You did think of it again?"

"Oh, yes; for days. And then I made up my mind I would not come," she said.

"Good girl—prudent Zeph," replied Dudley.

"Keep as wise as that, child, to the end of your days, and you will be safe from all danger."

"You are a nice one to preach!" said Zeph, laughing. "Did you wait long for me?"

"An hour."

"Poor man!" said she, with mock commiseration; "I wish I had said 'No' to you at the Grandison."

"It is of no consequence," replied Dudley.

"But it was a dull, miserable night, wasn't it?"

"It was. But I saw Ben, and he made faces at me."

"He never told me he had seen you," she said, laughing. "I am sorry you waited for me, but it would not have been right to come."

"All was for the best, I dare say. Why, you did not even know me this afternoon."

"Not at first. Who would have dreamed of your being in this part of the world?"

"There is no telling where I may turn up," he replied; "I am not accountable for my actions."

"Oh, good gracious!"—with a pretty exhibition of feigned alarm—"let me get away from you at once."

"Perhaps I may look in at the Grandison this evening."

"I wish you"—

Then she stopped, and he said, earnestly:

"Go on."

"No, thank you; I'd rather not."

"You should always finish your sentences," he said, reprovingly.

"Oh, should I?"

"And if you'll only say that you would not be particularly sorry to see me at the ball, it is more than possible that I shall come creeping in at a late hour to say good-night to you."

"How kind of you!" she cried, ironically; "but I shan't say anything of the sort."

"Very well."

"There's the rooms," she said, half pettishly, half flippantly, "and if you want to see me, you know where to find me. And if you don't—why, you can do the other thing."

"Admirably argued," he said, coolly; "I will reflect upon the position."

"Good-afternoon, then."

"Good-afternoon."

He extended his hand, and she placed hers within it, and looked at him shyly again. For an instant the thought crossed him that he would attempt to kiss her, and then something in her look told him it would be a failure, and then he should offend her. It was not likely he should ever see her again, he thought; here was the end of a funny and singular kind of flirtation; he would not hurt her feelings by any eccentricity of conduct.

"Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye, sir," answered Zeph.

She went away among the bracken toward the revelers, looking back once at him and waving her hand in return to his salutation before she disappeared among the trees.

"She's a curious girl," he soliloquized, "a nice girl certainly, and above her class altogether. Now many a man would hunt that poor girl to death—to a moral death, if possible. What black-hearted devils there are in this world, to be sure! How easy for one of them, if he were good-looking

and clever and young, to talk this semi-fast little coach out of her honest sphere into wrong before she knew where she was! Poor little Zeph—good-bye to you! I wonder what Geraldine would think of Dudley Grey talking to a pretty shop-girl on Keston Common! I wonder what this world of starch and decorum would say about the matter altogether!"

CHAPTER III.

SMILES'S BENEFIT.

THE ball at the Grandison Rooms was a brilliant success. Mr. Smiles finished his season in a blaze of triumph. There was hardly standing-room among the crowd of patrons who flocked in to say good-bye to Smiles till next September. All the ladies and gentlemen who had been to Keston, and all the ladies and gentlemen whose various businesses had not permitted them to go to Keston, were there on that particular evening to do honor to the proprietor, to wish him joy, to congratulate him on pecuniary results, and to stand treat in "sherry wine," until the world to Smiles, on that festive occasion, was steeped in sherry wine to the top-most brim.

Little Zeph was the belle of the ball; everybody acknowledged that fact without a murmur. She wore a new dress for the occasion, too—not the book-muslin of the afternoon's garden party, but a smart gray merino, trimmed with scarlet, and a new pair of the best lavender kid gloves, with scarlet satin bows at the wrists. She came early, and danced till late; she was snapped up by eligible partners: there was a corn-chandler and seedsman, who had a shop in the Tottenham Court Road, and was doing well, and had only six grown-up girls to take care of, who was so extraordinarily attentive to Zeph that it was seen very quickly by perceptive contemporaries that "Budds was caught," and it was Zeph's fault if she did not "hook" him before the evening was over. Budds was a friend of Smiles, and a cut above the Grandison folks, take them in the lump. He had gone to Keston to oblige Smiles, and had come to the ball to oblige Smiles, and drank a quantity of bad sherry to oblige Smiles, and fallen in love, head over ears, with Zeph Carrington before he knew where he was, or what marvels love and sherry together could effect.

Zeph danced and laughed with the corn-chandler, but kept him at a respectful distance, although Ben, with whom she danced also, took her to task in his usual jealous fashion, and said she was encouraging Old Budds, and that if Old Budds did not behave himself better, he'd be found weltering in his gore before the evening was over. Zeph laughed, and called him "a jealous pate," and "a disagreeable fellow," and flitted from one partner to the other—a being full of light and life, whom that long day's holiday had brightened rather than fatigued. If she had been very closely watched, one might have imagined that she was a rifle too restless and gay, and that, as the hours glided by, she glanced several times during the dances toward the entrance doors, as if half-expectant to find a friend there, and half-disappointed to miss him among the crowd.

It was twelve o'clock when she caught sight of him, and felt her cheeks burning strangely. He had come, then; he had kept his word; he had taken the trouble to find his way to the Grandison especially to see her! She affected not to be aware of his presence during the dance, and only as she passed through the room afterward, leaning on the arm of her partner—it was Budds again, hot and short of breath and reeking—did she look up, with as pretty an air of surprise as a West End belle of half a dozen seasons might have done under similar circumstances.

"Good-evening," said he, very calmly and gravely, as he stopped her and her partner, and shook hands with Zeph; "I hope you have enjoyed your dance?"

"Very much, indeed, thank you."

"I am in time for my waltz, I hope—thank you—will you take my arm?" he said, in one breath, and before Zeph could remonstrate, or Budds recover from the confusion into which he had been thrown, Dudley Grey had escorted his fair prize into the refreshment-room, ensconced her at one

of the tables, and was regarding her very thoughtfully.

"What makes you look at me like that?" Zeph asked, half frightened at his long and steady stare at her.

"I am only wondering why you come here and mix with these people."

"They are very nice people," said she, quickly on defense again.

"You are so much too good for the men here, and so different from the women!" he said.

"Oh, it's very fine to tell me that nonsense."

"Upon my honor I mean it," he said, earnestly; "I have been thinking seriously about it."

"How good of you!"

"And when you think seriously, too, if you ever are troubled by a serious thought, Zeph," he added, "I hope you will arrive at the same conclusion."

"I don't come here to think," said Zeph, "but to dance and enjoy myself. I have enough time for troublesome thoughts over my work, and in my dull home."

"Is your home dull?"

"Yes, very."

"I am sorry for that. I am—Who the devil's this?" he muttered.

He had known who it was before the impious exclamation escaped him. He had recognized Ben before that sulky young man had recognized him, and dropped his lower jaw on his chest in his astonishment at seeing him.

"Zeph," Ben said, huskily, "it's our dance. I could not make out where you had got to."

"Don't dance," whispered Dudley; "I want to speak to you before I go."

Zeph hesitated, colored, looked at the table, and then at Ben.

"I am very tired, Ben," she said; "you must let me off this dance, please."

"That ain't fair, that ain't."

"You heard the lady tell you she was tired," said Dudley, in a haughty tone; and Ben stared at the speaker, and then looked away from him to Zeph.

"She needn't come if she don't like," he growled forth.

"Then I don't like," said Zeph, positively.

"All right; that's English," was Ben's reply, as he walked away with his hands in his pockets, and his head thrown very much back.

"I am afraid we were rather hard on Ben," said Dudley, with mock gravity.

"He never will take 'No' for an answer."

"You are very kind to give up a dance with him to oblige me," Dudley added.

"You need not flatter yourself I did that," said Zeph, standing her ground at every point still; "I don't like dancing with Ben."

"You will tell me next you don't like Ben himself."

"I can't bear him—sometimes."

"Ah! sometimes; but then the other times?"

"He's nothing to me at any time," said Zeph, pettishly. "What do you keep talking about Ben for? What—what do you want to say to me before you go?"

Dudley was silent at this appeal. He hardly knew what he wanted to say, or knowing it, he hardly dared to say it. On the misty border-land separating good intentions from selfishness, irresolution, and this new wild fancy beating at his heart, he hesitated strangely.

"You are making game of me!" cried Zeph, indignantly.

"Upon my honor I am not," he replied. "Why should I come here to 'make game' of you?"

"I don't know," she answered; "I can't understand you."

"It is easily seen why I come to this place."

"No, it is not. Why?"

She met his gaze steadily for a while, but her blue eyes drooped at last.

"You ask me that question?" he said.

"Yes."

"To see you."

"It's all very fine to tell me that," replied Zeph, laughing very loudly; "I wonder how many girls you have said that to in the last five years, now?"

"Not to one."

"Oh, you story-teller!" cried Zeph.

"For what reason do you think I have come to this den?" he exclaimed.

"It's not a den," said Zeph, "and I don't believe you come to see me, because"—

"Well, because?"

"I sh'n't tell you," cried Zeph, coloring again; "I have altered my mind."

"Did I not tell you this afternoon that you had a very bad habit of cutting your sentences in half?" said Dudley. "Now please finish this one, for I am very curious. Why did I not come here to see you?"

"Well, then"—

"Go on," he said, as she paused again.

"You would have come a little earlier if you wanted to talk to me," she condescended to explain.

"I have been very busy this evening—I could not get away," he said; and Zeph shook her head incredulously at his reply.

He could not tell her that he had made up his mind not to see her again; that he had scoffed at his own fancy, his own wild wish to meet her—his own bad taste almost—until Frank Amore had looked him up at his chambers, and barred the way, as it were, to the Grandison, and then he had fretted and fumed until his friend had gone and left him free to act. This was the result of his freedom; a mad plunge after a pretty face, an insane desire for half an hour's flirtation with a milliner—the forging of one more link in a chain the heaviness of which he never dreamed of then.

Heaven alone knew what there was in this half-taught, half-fearless girl to lure his sober self to a tenth-rate dancing-room; but he felt there was a spell upon him, and that it was beyond his power to account for it. He was ashamed of being there; he was amazed at the company by which he was surrounded. He was a man who had mixed much in society, and had met hundreds of pretty and clever women with whom he might have flirted, had he cared to do so, and to whom he had been pleasant and courteous only, and yet this girl was a fascination despite himself and herself. Ay, there was the rub; Zeph Carrington did not encourage him. The flaunting, fast style of the ordinary shop-girl was not there, only a curious independent frankness that puzzled him, that defied him, that looked down upon him and his efforts to impress her, that seemed to say: "My world is as good as your world, and you don't frighten me with the grandeur of the sphere from which you have descended." She piqued him by her independence, but she drew him on almost unwillingly toward her.

It was one o'clock, and the band was playing its last galop.

"Shall we wind up the evening with a dance?" he said, suddenly.

"Just to show that you are not above present company," replied Zeph, archly, as she rose.

"Just to render this night memorable to me," he said, in a tone that startled her, as she took his arm and walked to the ball-room, at the door of which she stopped.

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed, "I am afraid I promised Mr. Budds."

"Never mind that fellow. You will dance with him all the rest of the year, perhaps," he said; and then they were whirling round the room in a galop, and Mr. Budds, after watching them for a while with his thumb-nail between his teeth, dashed at the brown sherry again, and overdid it with four more glasses, and rendered life a blank till the boy took the shutters of the shop down next day, and found him on the parlor rug, with his widowed head against the fender.

Long before that time Zeph Carrington and Dudley Grey were standing in the street together, and the revelers were streaming from the entrance and going their various ways. Zeph was cloaked and hooded, and Dudley hoped that she would not catch cold.

"Not I," she said. "Good-night."

"I am going your way," he said.

"No, thank you."

"Part of your way is my way," he said.

"I would prefer it was not," was her reply.

"Are you going home alone?" he inquired.

"I have not far to go," she replied. "I am used to being alone. You must not come with me, please," she added, very firmly now.

"Ben is going your way, perhaps," Dudley said, severely. "You would not say 'No,' to Ben."

"Ben knows father, who is sitting up for me. Ben is a friend of mine."

"And I am not?"

"Why, of course not."

"But I may be presently."

"Not very likely."

"You will give me a chance," he urged; "you keep me at arms-length, and—and I long to see you again."

"Oh! don't say that," she cried.

"Will you meet me this time—cannot I see you to-morrow?"

"No."

"Next Saturday, now that this—place is to be shut, thank God."

Zeph laughed merrily, but did not reply.

"You are frightened of me; you can't trust me," he said reproachfully.

"I'm not easily frightened, and," she added, "I can trust you, I think."

"Well, promise to meet me here next Saturday, for half an hour only if you like."

"Oh! it isn't right."

"Where is the harm? I wouldn't harm you for the world," he said.

"I don't think you would—even if you could," Zeph added confidently.

"Then you'll meet me?"

"Very well, then. Yes."

"And you will not break your word this time?"

"No."

"Thank you; it is a compact. Good-night."

He left her and strode towards his chambers, rejoicing for a while. As he neared home his heart sank a little, and he thought over again that he was acting like a fool and a villain. No, not a villain. God forbid that! but undoubtedly very like a fool.

CHAPTER IV.

LOVE IN A FOREST.

ZEPH CARRINGTON kept her word on this occasion, and met Dudley Grey. It was the beginning of a new life to both of them, and yet of an old story which happens every day. Flirtations of this character spring up with each turn of the hand upon the dial, and comedy, farce, burlesque, and tragedy result therefrom—the tragedy most often, judging by the painted horrors of our streets. This was the beginning of a tragedy too, after its kind, though neither guessed at the shadows in advance, and there was not a thought of evil at the heart of man or woman. Each went forward alike blindly, a little recklessly, thinking not of the morrow or of the consequences of this ill-assorted acquaintanceship. The woman was young, and vain, and trusting, and the man was full of adventure and without guile. Neither had known what temptation was or what love was in real earnest, and both came to be friends, and to keep their strange friendship a secret from a world which would not have believed in them for an instant.

Their first meeting was a stroll in the Mall till dusk, and an early parting; their second was to the theatre, where the proud Dudley Grey sat quietly by the side of little Zeph at the back of the pit, where never a friend of his was likely to discover him. Zeph would only go to the pit with him, where she had been with her father, and with Ben too, and which was quite good enough for her, she said; and he admired her frankness, and smiled at her intense enjoyment of the play and players. The girl's pleasure in everything that appertained to the amusements of life was a marvel to one on whom public amusements had palled somewhat. She was a child in her love for the stage; for a while she would forget her new friend in the mimic world before her, turning only to him at the end of an act with, "Isn't it beautiful?" and wondering sometimes at his gloomy, absent looks. By degrees she came to think of him as a friend—as a fine friend who took her out a great deal, and spent a great deal of money upon her, in her estimation; presently, as a superior being, very good, but very mysterious, in whom every confidence might be placed, who was a different man from anyone whom she had ever met, who was surely

in love with her, and would tell her so on some happy "outing" together, and end the story by asking her to be his wife. He was above her sphere, she knew, but girls married out of their sphere in books and plays, from which real life was sketched, and she was pretty, and he was fond of her. She was a lucky girl, she thought. He did not ask any questions concerning her father—a stolid, indifferent man, with a supreme faith in Zeph's being able to take care of herself. Zeph earned her own living, and paid her share of the rent, and Mr. Carrington was not at home too much to notice what time his daughter spent away from it; if he had, he would not have been curious; it was not his way. She was a shrewd, careful little woman, was his Zeph, God bless her. Ben Travers came and worried him about his daughter; wanted to discover where she went twice or thrice a week, and with whom, and he told him to ask Zeph if he wished to know, which he did, and was told, somewhat pertly, to mind his own business—which he did, too, as well as a man was able who had set his heart on having Zeph for a wife.

And Dudley Grey—what were the feelings of this eccentric individual, when Zeph Carrington had become his companion and friend, and there was a terrible pleasure in her society, a novelty that time did not stale, an attraction that a close intimacy did not tend to diminish? He was ashamed of his own weakness, but not of Zeph. Zeph was always well dressed, and looked a quiet little lady; she was brisk and full of vivacity—by degrees, as she became his friend, her faculties of observation set much of her grammar right, restored all her h's to their rightful places, did away with all the odd words and slangy phrases common to shop life, shop companions, and the back streets wherein her life had been cast. He would not have owned it to himself at that time, he would still have considered it a silly flirtation, but at the end of three months there was a powerful and indomitable feeling in his heart toward the girl he had picked up in a dancing-room. He would not have called it love, but it was. He would never let the world have the laugh at him by saying that a milliner had upset all the sober calculations of his life, but she had; he could not tell a single friend how she stood between him and his studies, the bar he had been called to, the book he was writing, the friends at his club, and, above all, the woman to whom he was engaged to be married. Yes, that was the trial of this weakling, who meant no harm, but who could not see his way clearly to any good now. If it had not been for Geraldine de Courcy (niece and possibly heiress to the Countess of Bareblades), a woman whom he thought he had loved once, being only two years older than himself, good-looking, and with expectations—oh! if it had not been for Geraldine, of whose existence poor Zeph was unaware! He felt that he dared not tell the work-girl of the heiress—Zeph would ask too many questions, and sift out too quickly the truth—forever away from Zeph must be the story of that engagement, even the knowledge of his own position in the world. He was playing an unworthy part, and not always with success. He liked Zeph to think him a poor and struggling barrister, rather than a man with some property of his own—all his great, grand friends were kept in the background, away from any conversation on which they might intrude, and it was only now and then that a chance word betrayed him, and rent the veil between Zeph Carrington and his own world of which she knew so little, but guessed more than he gave her credit for.

When it came upon him, late in the autumn, that he was really in love with this girl, when her work-life had become a torture to him, and he writhed at her anecdotes of business, and of the coarseness and tyranny of her employers, when everything she said had power to move him, when the fact of her meeting Ben in the streets or at her home, irritated and maddened him, when he became jealous of workmen and corn-chandlers, and could think of nothing but this girl, when he became aware that there was love for him in her heart too, and that she seemed only happy in his company, the truth dismayed him, though he tried hard to confront it with philosophy.

It was in Epping Forest when that truth came closer to the foreground, in the dry autumn weath-

er, before the rain and cold had set in. They had gone away together—it was Zeph's last holiday, the fourteenth day of the fortnight that Messrs. Dapper, Dangler, and Smart had accorded to her. It had been arranged that they should spend the holiday in the country: Zeph had perfect faith in her companion now, and would have gone to the end of the world with him, and the woodland at Snaresbrook and Fairmead had been her idea of England's scenery, when her mother was alive, and took her to the forest in a spring van along with father, and a gallon stone jug, and a noisy gang, who sang all the way there, and quarrelled all the way home. Our young couple had talked of a picnic together for weeks, but Dudley had only mustered up courage for the adventure at last. Zeph had not seen any reason for consideration or hesitation—faith having been once established between them, the "proprieties," the usages of polite or impolite society, had never troubled her again. Dudley was her "young man," who took her out and respected her when she was out, and having placed confidence in him, it was illimitable. She did not know any rule that should stop her going anywhere with Dudley Grey, and she went to Epping Forest as she would have gone to a play or concert, without a thought of the etiquette that should govern the proceeding. That Epping excursion was a day of wonderful happiness to them both. To begin with, the joy and excitement of Zeph raised the spirits of Dudley Grey—who had become overthoughtful of late days—and the world was very bright on that especial occasion. They were boy and girl rather than man and woman; the old forest echoed with their laughter and with the music of Zeph's voice. Dudley forgot Zeph was a milliner, with a father who lived down a back street and went to a foundry every day; he forgot Geraldine de Courcy, he forgot he was engaged to be married—forgot everything but his supreme satisfaction in Zeph's society, and that respect for Zeph which he had ever scrupulously shown her.

It was a bright, warm autumn day, with a remembrance of summer in it, and they had the great green forest to themselves after they had wandered out of the beaten track into the by-paths and underwood. It was Arcadia, with the troubles and responsibilities of life set back in that outer world to which this odd pair no longer belonged. It was a world set apart from "bonnet building" and "cap trimming" to the one, from the dry study of law-books to the other. It was a holiday, each thought, to be marked by a white stone.

And then the picnic for two, provided by Dudley, and brought to Epping in a bass basket. The cold fowl, the slices of ham, the French rolls, the salad, the Champagne, and the fun over the difficulties of disposing of all these, the jests and laughter and bewildering joy in each other's society, constituted a happiness such as they never had again in all their thoughtless lives.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when they talked of making their way to the railway station, when Zeph looked up at the sky with surprise.

"It will soon be dark, Dudley; let us get toward home."

"Let me finish my cigar, Zeph, and sing to me again before we go," he said.

She looked attentively at him.

"Why, how sad you are, all of a sudden!"

"I am feeling sad," he confessed, mournfully.

"Have I said anything to offend you? I—I know I am sharp at times, and rude and saucy, but you ought to understand me now. What is it?"

"Nothing, Zeph," he answered; "only a fit of the blues, from which I suffer occasionally. Will you forgive me?"

"What have I to forgive?"

"I don't think it was quite fair of me to bring you here," he confessed.

"Why not?"

"You are younger than I. People would say I was a scamp and a villain—and that you were very foolish."

"I don't care what people say," replied Zeph, with the old toss of her pretty head, "if it isn't the truth."

"But these good folk can make what is false

look so like the truth that the world judges infernally harshly of the situation."

"I—I don't quite understand," she said, timidly; "you are so strange to-day!"

"This is a day for me to remember for all time. Has it been a happy day for you, Zeph?"

"Yes, she confessed, frankly; "one of the happiest of my life."

"It has been one of the happiest of mine, and yet I wish it had never been."

Zeph looked hard at him again. His mournful manner was new to her. There was regret, even misery, in his face.

"Tell me what you are thinking about. All this is a novelty to me, Dudley."

"Supposing this was the last day you and I were ever to meet, would you be sorry?" he asked suddenly.

"The last day—we were ever to meet!" she echoed, and all the color died out from her face, and left her white and cold and hard.

"Yes—would you be sorry?"

She did not answer for an instant; then she said, very proudly and quietly.

"Not if you wished it."

"You could say 'Good bye' willingly?"

"More than willingly—if you could," she answered, in the same sharp tone.

"I never implied I could say this willingly," he remarked; "but it might be better for us both, before"—

He did not finish the sentence, and she did not ask him to do so. For a few more minutes they sat together in silence; then he got up and offered his hand to raise her. She did not take his hand, but sprang to her feet without his assistance, and they went on slowly together toward the high-road.

"You are quick to take offense, Zeph," he said at last.

"I am not offended," she replied.

"I think you are."

"What have I to be offended about?" she inquired.

"Nothing," he said; "and I did not mean to give offense. I was thinking of you—and only of you—not of myself, God knows."

"I have given up trying to comprehend you to-day," said Zeph; "please do not worry me by riddles."

"I am not fond of riddles, Zeph, but life has become an enigma to me."

"Do you want me to understand that you are tired of my company?" she asked, very resentfully still; "is that what you are driving at?" she added, with her old phraseology coming to the front, as she seemed to step suddenly toward her old life.

"You are dearer to me to-day than you have ever been," he burst forth with vehemence, and then he was silent for her sake and his own. Zeph anticipated that he would talk of love after this, avow his attachment, and draw from her a confession of the deep strong love she had for him; but he preferred to walk on moodily to being frank and true and honest, as he should be. If he really cared for her, he would surely speak now—if he were not too grand and "stuck up" after all—if he loved her as much as he had induced her to believe from the attention which he had paid her. He had led her by degrees to forget her own sphere and to neglect her friends; he had given her a new existence and bright hopes; he had sought her out and taken her away from her "set;" he had taught her almost by his manner to look down upon all the past amusements of her life. He had rendered her a prouder woman, she had thought even a happier, until this sudden turn had come, and she had discovered there were clouds and doubts about her, where she had looked for that eternal sunshine which belongs never to this earth. And yet those last words had brought the smiles back to her lips and gladness to her heart; he could not have been paving the way for a separation or have grown tired of her, to have said all that so passionately and truthfully. He would speak presently perhaps; meanwhile she was too proud a girl to betray any of that anxiety which in her heart she naturally felt. For it had come to pass that in the heart of hearts of poor Zeph Carrington, Dudley Grey had become her idol—such an idol as a

weak fond woman worships with all her soul, and is crushed to the earth when it falls.

She was clever at disguise, however. No man was likely to guess the depth of her feelings without betraying his own clearly to her. She was not going to state that she was in love with Dudley Grey, if Dudley Grey had only thought of her as a passing acquaintance and a pleasant companion for the nonce—not she, indeed.

"We must not have our holiday end in doubt and discord, Zeph," he said; "this should be a fair one to the end."

"It is your fault if it is anything else."

"Then it shall be my fault no longer."

He put his arm around her and kissed her lightly on the cheek, and Zeph did not shrink away from his caress. When a young man takes a girl out for the day, he is privileged to kiss her once or twice; that is the rule of the society of which Zeph was a distinguished ornament; and if Ben had kissed her in the days gone by, why not the man who had superseded Ben, and rendered him by comparison almost a monster in her eyes?

Dudley essayed his light vein again, and Zeph seconded his efforts by laughing at his jests. They were seemingly a light-hearted couple as they walked along the highroad in the twilight toward the railway station. Suddenly the spirit of mischief, or that teasing spirit that is allied to it, and is natural in a woman anxious to test her power over the object of her affections, led Zeph to say:

"I have had a letter to-day, Dudley—from a gentleman."

"Oh, indeed!" and Dudley, too far gone in love to appreciate a joke, became very glum on the instant. "And what does the gentleman say?"

"Ah, that's a secret!"

"I did not think you had a secret from me," he said, reproachfully; "but if you don't care to tell me, I will not force your confidence."

"Cannot you guess who would write a letter to me?"

"Ben?"

"No."

"That ass of a corn-chandler in the Tottenham Court Road?"

"Oh, no!" said Zeph, laughing at the severity of his criticism on the widower.

"I don't know any more of your friends," he said, severely.

"Mr. Smiles, then."

"Who the devil is Smiles?" he asked, almost ferociously.

"Why, the principal of the Grandison Rooms, to be sure."

"What does he want?"

"I'll show you the letter if you wish," said Zeph, submissively; for Dudley Grey's amiability had all vanished.

"If it is not private and confidential," he replied, sarcastically.

Zeph took a letter from her pocket and gave it him, and he read it in the dim light of the dying day as he walked on by her side. It was a printed circular announcing Mr. Smiles's intention of opening the Grandison Rooms the first week in October, and of his renewed endeavors to promote the comfort and pleasure of his patrons, and to render his rooms a pattern of that respectability and decorum for which they had been always distinguished while under his management. At the bottom of the circular—and here was the sin and grievous offense which, in the eyes of Dudley Grey, Mr. Smiles had committed—was written in lead-pencil: "I reckon upon you for the opening night. I can promise you heaps of nice young men for partners. Don't fail to come next Saturday.—E. S."

"I did not know the cad favored you with these familiar postscripts," Dudley said, coldly, as he returned the letter to her.

Zeph's lip quivered, and her eyes brimmed with tears, but she answered with the old quickness:

"Yes, the cad does sometimes."

"Then—it's like his infernal impudence."

"He is an older friend than you are," she retorted.

"What a friend to be proud of! a little, red-nosed, gin-drinking sparrow," cried Dudley, sav-

agely—"a starveling who can scarcely keep soul and body together by the profits of his semi-moral establishment."

"You have no right to run the place down," cried Zeph, indignantly; "where you have been yourself—where you met me first—where you know I go."

"Where I hope you will never go again, Zeph."

"I don't see why I should not," she answered.

"It is not fit for you."

"There is no harm in it."

"It is a disreputable den," cried Dudley.

"I have spent many a happy evening in it."

"At the expense of the good opinion of your neighbors, and at the risk of your character," said Dudley.

"What!" cried Zeph, looking indignantly into his face, and then turning away and covering her own with her two hands. A moment's silence, a few more steps along the highroad, and then a passionate outburst of weeping, which bore away every atom of forced composure on her side, and of self-restraint on his. All his ill feeling and uncharitableness vanished, and a deep concern for her and her grief took possession of him. He had never seen her give way before; he had thought her hard to impress, a charming girl, but defiant, and cool, and clever.

"Zeph, my dear Zeph, don't cry."

But Zeph, once subdued, could not restrain her tears very easily. Her pride had been mortified, his harsh words had cut into her heart, and showed how he despised her and her ways, and was prepared to sneer at and heap contumely upon everyone and everything with which her past life had been associated. She had almost thought herself of late days above the glories of the Grandison Rooms and the triumphs of the Grandison season, for the men were not like Dudley, and talked differently, and seemed of another and a lower world altogether. But it was cruel of him to attack her thus mercilessly, to wound her and her pride, to think her life immeasurably beneath his own, and tell her so, as a wind-up to the bliss of their holiday.

"I might have expected this," she sobbed; "I have been waiting for you to insult me in this way; I have been a fool altogether."

"My dear Zeph, I did not mean to insult you," he cried; "I—I could not endure the thought of you going to those rooms again, and mixing with the people there; you are too good for them. Don't cry. I was jealous. I love you, and can't bear this any longer."

He put his arms round her, and kissed her tears away, and Zeph suffered herself to be caressed and consoled. The truth had escaped in a wild moment of excitement, and he had told her that he loved her! He did not say anything more, he did not grow eloquent concerning his love, as the heroes always did in the penny numbers she read; but the confession had escaped him, and a feeling of immeasurable content was at the bottom of her full young heart. The man loved her, and though she cried still, and he still essayed to sooth her, they were tears of happiness now, born of his avowal.

They walked quietly to the station, even gravely, as if they had entered on a new phase of existence in which they understood each other more completely, and regarded the future—their future—with reverence and awe. They were lovers from that hour, Zeph considered, and there were no more secrets and half confidences to follow that day. In the lottery of woman's life, which has its aim and end in happy marriage, Zeph had drawn a prize, and she was proud of it. Why should she disguise her feelings, now that he had told her that he loved her? There was not much lightness or brightness over the rest of the journey home; Dudley was very thoughtful, and Zeph was content to sit quietly at his side, with her hand clasped in his. There was very little conversation exchanged between them; but Zeph was happy in her silence, and glad to think for herself.

When they were nearing Fenchurch Street, she said, in a low voice, "May I tell all to father, Dudley?"

Dudley came back from dream-world, and said, quickly, "No, no; don't tell your father anything yet."

"He knows I have come to Epping with a friend."

"A male friend?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, very little. 'You can take care of yourself, I know, Zeph,' he said, 'but I should like to hear a little more of this new friend of yours, for all that.' Now if I could tell him to-night, and make him almost as happy as myself?"

"Tell him what?"

"Oh, you know," said Zeph, blushing, "for you have not been making fun of me, surely!"

"No, Zeph," he answered, "there is no fun in all this. We have passed out of the region of flirtation into grave facts and earnest truths. But I must think it carefully over—I have a great deal on my mind, girl."

"Will you have any secrets from me?" she asked.

"Not any—presently."

"Will you tell me next time we meet?"

"Yes; next time, then."

"Oh, Dudley, I am dreadfully happy now," she whispered. "I have been anxious and miserable at times, and you have been often—oh! so strange. It has been so very, very hard to try and understand you."

"How was that?"

"You have been dull and thoughtful, and then so full of fun and—and affection—like a man who did not know whether he cared for me or not," she explained.

"Ah! I knew how much I cared too well, Zeph," he replied.

From Fenchurch Street to the back streets of Soho in a hansom cab, and then the parting at the corner of the street where Zeph's father lived.

"Good-night, dear."

"Good-night, Dudley," she answered; "I will not go to the Grandison any more. Never any more!"

"That's right—thank you; there's a good Zeph," he cried.

"And I never meant to go, really," she added, "because you have always looked so cross when I have spoken of the rooms to you. You will forgive my worrying you about them to-day, Dudley, won't you?"

"God bless you, child—yes."

He stooped and kissed her, as he might have kissed a little child even; and then he bade her "Good-night" again and hurried away. With every step from her his heart grew heavier with self-reproach and self-abasement, and the darkness on his path became denser and more heavy. To the end of all this—so lightly and carelessly begun, as it had been—the barrister did not see his way.

CHAPTER V.

IRRESOLUTION.

Had Dudley Grey, barrister at law, been like unto most men, this story need not have been written, or its sequel might easily have been guessed. There is nothing new in a chance acquaintance, a man wandering out of his sphere to make love, and a poor girl flattered into indiscretion, perhaps into destruction. These are the passing events of a great city, the eternal shadows of the streets after the gas is lighted and the work of the day is over.

We have attempted an analysis of the feelings of Dudley Grey and Zeph Carrington, because both man and woman were ordinary mortals "with a difference." If they met and made love as thousands had done before them, without any heed to the codes of society, they were not able to regard it as a jest, or to part as easily as they had met, with no one the worse for the acquaintanceship. Dudley Grey, with whom we have particularly to do in this chapter, was tortured or blessed with a conscience. He was a man who knew he was on the wrong road, and who made one or two faint efforts to retrace his steps, and was unhappy altogether in his secret courtship. Many men whom he knew would have treated this matter lightly and laughingly, as a mere jest at which they would have expected a girl like Zeph to laugh also. They would not have believed in Zeph any more than they would have expected her—if she had not been quite

fool—to believe in them; and they would have turned away from her at a moment's notice, or without a moment's notice, and hardly given her another thought to their lives' end. Fresh faces, new flirtations, and the world only a merry-go-round, with no time to think of the troubles and aching hearts and bitter disappointments of a few in the great crowd.

Dudley Grey was new to the business. He had been a studious youth; he had been always proud and reserved; he had become engaged early in life to a lady whom he knew respected, and whom he fancied that he loved, until this wild, strange passion had mastered him and shown him what love was. He knew now that his parents and friends had prompted him to this engagement, had told him what a good thing it was to secure the affections of Geraldine de Courcy, a stately, high-born being, who would bring him fifteen hundred a year as a start-off, and whose expectations were wonderful. He was a lucky dog to hit the fancy of Miss De Courcy, every body said, and as she was a beautiful woman and only two years his senior, he had never repined at his fate, or seen anything to pine at until his philosophy was upset by a shop-girl.

What was to be done now it was difficult to say. He had gone of his own free will into temptation; he had meant no evil; he had been attracted by the face and manner of a woman whom he thought it would be easy to say good-bye to when he pleased; and the woman had turned to him with her whole heart, and believed in him with a force and passion which had changed the whole tenor of his life.

What was to be done? He thought of the whole position in his chamber night after night, day after day, with his work at a stand-still, and his brain oppressed by the truth. There were two good women in his mind, and he must break the heart of one of them—whose should it be? He was pledged to the lady; his interests, his future position in the world, his honor were at stake here; but he did not love Geraldine de Courcy any longer. In her presence he felt that he was a hypocrite, weighed down by a lie as big as a mill-stone. And yet he would fling to the winds all his chances if he married Zeph Carrington; his friends would laugh at him, everybody would laugh at him—one or two, like Frank Amore, would pity him for being such a fool. And Zeph would not make him a goodwife possibly; and Zeph's relations and friends! Great Heaven! to be dragged down to companionship with them, and to have for a father-in-law a man who was earning thirty-five shillings a week at a foundry! To be poor all his life for the sake of a delusion of this kind—a delusion which would fade and leave him the victim of a mesalliance—no, it must not be.

He was fond of Zeph, he knew; but he did not know how terribly fond of this quaint little girl he had become until he had made up his mind to part with her, to wean himself by degrees from the spell of her companionship. He was wrenching himself away from his better self in the effort, now that the girl looked up to him as to a demi-god, and valued him at a higher rate than he deserved. This task of dropping off by degrees—so easy an operation to men of the world, worldly, to men of the town, townly—was a giant's task to Dudley Grey, and beyond his moral strength. He awoke to the consciousness of his own weakness by degrees; the tears in Zeph's eyes, the tremor in her voice, at a chance word, or something that suggested a suspicion of a slight, the exuberance of spirits when he was his old self, and looked as if he loved her, all told upon him, and kept him irresolute. He could not make her unhappy while she trusted in him—he dared not tell her yet that he was underserving of her trust. Wait a while he must.

Since the expedition to Epping Forest she had altered very strangely, too; there was hardly an atom's worth of resemblance to the bright, pert little woman whom he had "chaffed" at the Grandison Rooms. She was a flirt then, vain of admiration, eager for excitement after work hours, seeing no pleasure in home, but finding her amusements out of it—a "fly-away" girl whom chance might save or bring to ruin, according to the good or evil genius who first influenced her life. Now she was a thoughtful, earnest being, proud of her conquest, and very full of love for it, thinking of nothing else in life save the man who had made

up his mind to get away from her, and young and innocent enough to believe in him implicitly. She was so terribly happy in this half engagement that he became afraid of her, and with every meeting it was a greater difficulty to close his heart against her. If he had not been fool enough to fall in love with her, he thought, it would have been an easy task to frame a plan of eternal separation; but she had become bound up with his life, with his heart-strings, and the ordeal was almost beyond his strength. Yet he must leave it to time; he could do nothing hastily and cruelly, he reasoned, meaning, perhaps, that he could not part with little Zeph yet awhile.

To a girl more suspicious or less trustful than Zeph Carrington, the actions of her lover might have suggested many grave doubts. They met always in secret. He shunned her home and her father. It was understood, she thought, that for a while, and for "family reasons," nobody should know what intimate friends they had become; all the truth was to follow presently, and when Dudley gave the signal to let in the brightness of her life upon the misty land wherein she stood with him. He did not talk of the future in this way; on the contrary, he carefully avoided any allusion to it now; but Zeph read it for herself, and thought she saw the end very clearly. She was afraid of his family and his friends; she knew they would look down upon her always, and think the worst of her that they could; and there was romance in all this secrecy and mystery, and she, poor child, was very young. This man was her first love, and he had come from a world of which she knew nothing. She would keep the secret for his sake; he surely knew what was best, and she was certain that he was very fond of her. If he had been "shamming," she would have known it in an instant, as a woman generally knows the true from the false in matters of this kind, and the very strength of his love for her added to the force of the delusion which deceived her. His fits of sadness were even in his favor, for in her presence there came stern feelings of remorse, which only her smiles could chase away. If he were dull, he had been worried by his family, she thought; somebody had been trying to persuade him to an expedition that would separate them for a time; somebody had seen them together, perhaps, and had been too curious with his questions.

Some one did come face to face with them at last. They were strolling home together from the theatre, where he took her very often for his own distraction's sake now, more than for her amusement, when they came face to face with Frank Amore. The young man looked from Dudley to Zeph, nodded to his friend, looked keenly at Zeph again, and passed on.

"Who is that?" she asked.

"A friend of mine."

"I have seen him somewhere," said Zeph. "Why, he came to the Grandison with you the first night we ever met!"

"Yes, that's right, Zeph. What a memory you have!"

Frank Amore proved that he had a good memory also—one of those memories which are extremely objectionable to other folk at times. Dudley found him at the gate of Clement's Inn, waiting for him later on in the night.

"Frank!" he exclaimed; "what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," was the grave answer.

"Is anything the matter?"

"I have been to the Bareblades."

"Geraldine is not ill?"

"No. But she expected you this evening. You promised to be there."

"I only half promised."

"Is it too late to have a talk with an old friend in his room to-night?" asked Frank, seriously.

"Oh, no," answered Dudley, "if there is anything of importance to communicate."

"Well, I think there is."

"Come in, then."

CHAPTER VI.

A FRIEND'S OPINION.

DUDLEY GREY guessed pretty correctly what had kept Frank Amore lingering at the gates of

the Inn till his return. He knew the lecture that was in store for him, and how Frank Amore would regard the position. He had lectured Frank in his day, proffered him wise counsel, talked a heap of worldly wisdom to him, and now it was the younger man's turn.

Dudley was unprepared, however, for the quick dash at the subject when they were face to face in his chambers, for the excitement of Amore, for the honest but hard plain-speaking which escaped him.

"Dudley, I did not think until to-night," he said, "that you were the man to lead a woman to ruin."

Dudley turned red, then very white.

"Neither am I," was his answer.

"If you have not gone to the bad, or dragged that poor girl to the bad, you must be close upon the brink," said Frank; "and I am sorry to think this of you after all the years of our acquaintance."

"You are a true moralist," answered Dudley, mockingly; "you allow nothing for extenuating circumstances, for the romance of the position, for a man seeking change or distraction out of the narrow groove to which society confines him. You are hard on me, Frank; you should have known me better."

"I don't seem to have known you at all," said Frank, doubtfully. "Yours is a character far beyond my comprehension."

"I have done no harm," was the reply.

"Yes, you have."

Dudley did not relish his friend's persistency. It was exceeding the limits of the friendship which existed between them. Frank Amore took a view of the position which it was not possible he could comprehend, and acted and spoke upon the suppositions he had himself created. Dudley was in no mood to continue the argument. He was slowly but surely feeling himself aggrieved; all the more surely, because he was conscious in his heart of the weakness of his own defense.

"Shall we dismiss the subject?" he said, coolly.

"Will you allow me to have my own opinion in this matter as well as yourself?"

Frank Amore regarded him earnestly. Here was a friend drifting rapidly away from the proprieties, and he had no power to save him, after all.

"I should have been glad to talk this over with you," he said, "to tell you about the Bareblades, and what they say and think of you; but you are irritable to-night, and not yourself."

"No, I am not myself," said Dudley, moodily, almost despairingly, "and I never shall be again."

"My dear Dudley, it is not too late—say it is not," cried Frank.

"I don't say it is too late," he answered, "for I have done no harm to the girl, Heaven knows. I have found her a pleasant companion and a dear friend, and I have respected her always. But I am not happy with her, and I can't be happy without her," he added, with a burst of passion that broke down all the self-restraint which he had endeavored to exhibit.

"You don't mean to tell me you are in love with the girl?" cried Frank, in his amazement.

"I am, by God!" cried Dudley Grey.

He got up and walked about the room like a wild beast in his den. Here was some one to confess the whole grim truth to at last, and with no fear of the world which would judge him presently more harshly than he deserved.

"Dudley," said his friend, "I am no saint; I don't look at this affair from the mountain-top of my own self-righteousness, and I am sure you have been foolish rather than wicked. I should not have thought too much of a flirtation of this character, dangerous as it may be, only"—

"Only what?"

"Only there is your engagement to Geraldine."

"Yes, I know," answered Dudley; "there is the misery of it all."

"You can't love both the women."

"Upon my soul, I think I do, after their fashions," said Dudley, with a hard laugh at his own confession.

"No; it must be either Geraldine or the shop-girl," said the other, thoughtfully; "and as you

are engaged solemnly to the one, and cannot under any possibility marry the other, why, the sooner you say farewell to the shop-girl the better."

"Yes, it is wise advice," Dudley replied, sorrowfully, "and if it was not breaking a girl's heart, it might be done."

"Will you tell me what you mean to do?"

"I don't know," answered Dudley, helplessly.

"Be a man. Be the Dudley Grey whom I have always known," said the other, seizing his advantage; "save yourself and save the girl."

"Yes, I am going to do that, but"—

"But what?"

"But I must have time. I can't dash at her with a sledge-hammer, and crush every hope in her heart at one blow. I will not do that!" cried Dudley.

"You do not think of Geraldine in this matter," said Frank—"how she feels your absence, and becomes suspicious, jealous even, of the excuses which you are continually making to keep away from her."

"She can't suspect anything."

"She is unhappy, Dudley. You have been engaged to each other for so long a time. Only think what you are doing," added Frank; "how badly you are behaving to both women."

"Yes, that's true," replied his friend; "I haven't much of a defense to urge, and you are so clearly on the right side of the argument that I will not trouble you with my answer. I can only say again, I have done no harm."

"But harm must come, unless," he said, bluntly, "you drop it."

"I'll drop it," said Dudley; "I had made up my mind before you spoke to me."

Then the two men shook hands on the strength of Dudley Grey's promise, and set the subject aside, for that night at least. They drank a glass of grog together, smoked a cigar, and parted the best of friends, although the topic which might have wrecked the confidence and faith of these old school-fellows had been discussed with some heat. When Frank Amore had gone back to the hospital, Dudley thought it all over again in the solitude of his quiet chambers, and sketched out a feeble little plan or two for the general peace of mind of everybody, without any great satisfaction to himself.

Was it too late? Had he gone too far, and was there never to follow happiness again? He was afraid so. He was afraid of Zeph—he did not see his way to confess to that little faithful woman that he had been a scamp from the first, and engaged to be married to another when he was professing his great affection for her. Not professing, for he was really and deeply in love, he was assured, and hence she had believed him and trusted in him. This was her reward—to be cast off as a something no longer worthy of his notice; to sink back to his own poor sphere with a heart full of bitterness against such men as he; to become desperate, or go wrong, perhaps, out of revenge upon herself, as many women had done before poor Zeph's day. He felt already that she was not the girl to treat the matter lightly—to get over it with a few hysterical tears and a shrug of her shoulders at the folly of it all. He had not been frank with her; he had never let her see one glimpse of a truth which might have put her on her guard, or separated her from him. There was the pity of it, and the cruelty and shame of it, and his confession was to come. Come it must he knew now—there was no help for it. It would be one sharp wrench, and then all over for good—for very good, thank Heaven! What life would be for a while without Zeph he did not clearly perceive, and he did not care to consider. He hardly knew himself how desperate a hold his passion had of him. He could not bear to think of her beginning life afresh, without him, of meeting her no more at the corner of the street wherein her place of business was, of seeing her face grow radiant at the sight of his, and at the consciousness that he was there again to take her into the bright world beyond the four walls of her work-room. He tried hard to think of Geraldine de Courcy instead, and of his pledge to her; of her love and his honor, or the little semblance of honor, that was left in him. He knew he did not love Geraldine now, but he did not think of giving her up, of telling her the whole truth of his infatuation, and asking

for that liberty which her wounded pride would assuredly be willing to accord. He was as selfish as most men, possibly. He could not bear the pain of separation from the woman he loved better than the ridicule which would be hurled at him and the object of his choice. It was a stern sacrifice for him to give up Zeph, but he would rather his heart bleed than his friends should laugh at him. Burke was right when he said there was only one passion—vanity!

Yes, Dudley Grey was very weak—one of those weak beings with which the world is overstocked, unfortunately. He was far weaker than he knew, for meeting Zeph Carrington an evening or two later on, when he was full of the wise intention of telling her the truth, and asking her forgiveness for his duplicity, he hesitated once more and put off the day of his confession. She was so bright and happy, so intoxicated by the dangerous atmosphere in which every breath was drawn, that he could not tell her that night. He would tell her next time they met, he thought; he would write to her the truth; he would do anything but own his folly then.

It was a mistaken kindness, and the last chance slipped by him.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE THOUGHT OF IT.

SOME four or five days after Dudley Grey's last meeting with Zeph Carrington—his last time of "keeping company with her," as Zeph phrased it—and before the opportunity had presented itself to meet her again, the barrister was disturbed and surprised one afternoon by two visitors to his rooms.

They came into Clement's Inn, and up the common staircase of the house in which he lodged, and startled him at his desk by a solemn ponderous dab with the knocker outside. He rose, opened the door, and stared at the two men, connecting them with an Old Bailey case which he had been studying of late days, until the consciousness that he was familiar with the features of the younger man dawned unpleasantly upon him.

"You know me again, Mr. Grey," said Ben, nodding his head toward him, but maintaining his stolid aspect. "I see you know me just as plain as I know you."

"Yes, I remember you," answered Dudley; then he looked hard at Ben's companion—a short, thick-set man, with great gray whiskers hanging in a ragged, unkempt fashion from his cheeks. Dudley knew who he was also, before the fact was made apparent to him, although the face was hard and rugged, and unlike Zeph's altogether. The man was in his factory dress, and had stolen an hour from his work to confront our hero in his home. Yes, Dudley knew who he was, and with what object he had come.

"This is Zeph's father," said Ben, by way of introduction.

"Indeed," responded Dudley, somewhat hoarsely. "Will you step inside? I hope," he added, slowly, "nothing has happened of any consequence to bring you here. Miss Carrington—she is well?"

"Something *has* happened," said Mr. Carrington in reply, and he and Ben followed Dudley into the room, "or I shouldn't have troubled you in this way, and without a warning like."

"Sit down," said Dudley; "don't hurry—take your time."

He did not wish to be hurried himself: it was he who wanted time to consider, to prepare for the crisis which had come to him at last, and which he was compelled to meet. He felt he must be on his guard, and not commit himself by any rash expression or promise to the father, with Zeph's old lover for a witness to every word he uttered. He felt even a little indignant, as though he had been led into a trap, and without fair warning, until the puzzled, pained look of Mr. Carrington subdued all sense of rage in him, and changed it into fear. It was a troubled face at which he glanced askance, and the first impression, that it was flushed with drink, took strength with every minute of the interview.

"I haven't much time to spare, and I don't want to take up too much of yourn," said Mr. Carrington; "but I am uneasy in my mind, sir,

and a word or two from you can set things straight, if they're ever to be straight again. Ben, says they ain't."

"More they ain't," added Ben, in sullen chorus. "I know what men like him mean when they come after such girls as Zeph. We all know how that ends; we're not blind, any of us."

Dudley drew a long breath.

"Will you tell me what has happened?" he said to the father.

"Yes, I will. Zeph has got the sack," replied Mr. Carrington.

"Discharged from her employment!" exclaimed Dudley.

"And through you. That's the hardest part of it, Mr. Grey," said the father. "Through you."

"I cannot see how I have been the means of"—

"Oh, it's easy told," interrupted Mr. Carrington; "they found out at her business she wasn't going on well—so they put it, mind you—and that she went about with a gentleman—that's you!—to all kinds of amusement, coming home at all hours—which I know myself, having to sit up for her; and they told her—God damn 'em!—what do you think they told her?" blurted forth the father.

"You need not repeat it," said Dudley; "I can guess what unjust folk would say to a defenseless woman. But they are in the wrong—completely in the wrong, I give you my word of honor."

"I don't want it," said Mr. Carrington, shaking his head to and fro in emphatic protest. "I don't want anybody to tell me my gal isn't a bad un. I know in all London there isn't anyone with less vice in her than Zeph. That's not it."

Dudley Grey knew that was not it, too; it was not the depth and extent of the motive which had brought Zeph's father to his room.

"She had chucked up the business. She did not care to be spoken to by the governors, and they said she'd better leave at once; and," added Mr. Carrington, "left she has."

"I am sorry she has been so hasty as this," Dudley murmured.

"Then me an her had some words, too, for I wasn't best pleased with it at all, and said more than I meant, as people do when they're riled. And then," he continued, as he leaned forward, planted one grimy hand on each of his corduroy knees, and stared with grave intentness at the barrister, "she up and told me everything—who the gentleman was, and what he was, and where he lived, how he had been keeping company with her, oh! forever so long, and was uncommon fond of her."

"And was going to marry her," added Ben ironically.

"That's what I've called to ask about," said Mr. Carrington. "I told Zeph this morning I should come and talk to you straightforward-like, and as man to man."

"What did she say to that?" asked Dudley, in a low tone.

"She said I might, and welcome. She could trust you, she said to tell the truth. She would have come with me if I'd let her," he continued, "but I thought it was best for you and me to have this out together."

"Yes—no," said Dudley, irresolutely. "I wish she had come with you, I think."

"Why?"

"I could have explained the whole matter more clearly, perhaps," was his slow answer.

"What did I tell you?" growled Ben to his companion. "Didn't I say so? Can't you see what his game's been? Haven't I said so all along?"

"I will not have your interference," cried Dudley Grey, fiercely, at last; "it is no business of yours."

"Oh yes, it is," answered Ben, stolidly but boldly: "for you see, if you hadn't stepped between me and Zeph, she would have been my wife by this time. I wanted her to be. I liked her awfully."

"Hold your row, Ben," said Mr. Carrington, "and let me speak. It is my place, not yourn, to talk."

"Go it," muttered Ben; "but I ain't going to be told it's not my business."

"Let's get to the rights of it, or the wrongs of it," said Mr. Carrington; "that's what I have come for, Mr. Grey. What am I to make out of all of this?—that my daughter ain't good enough for you, and never was? That you've thought it a fine thing to take her out and unsettle her for all our homely ways? That you've turned her head, and made her believe you're desperate in love with her, and you've never meant it all the time? That you would have ruined her if you could, and told your swell friends afterwards you'd thrown another woman on the streets? That's it, now; own it like the scamp you are!"

Dudley Grey winced beneath these hard words, and the shame of his position burned red into his face. He might have been expected to be judged like this by one whose heart was in his child's good name and fame. He was judged unmercifully, but it was natural the man should think in this way, and disbelieve any statement he might attempt in extenuation of his conduct. Extenuation! it was beyond him. He made the attempt however.

"Mr. Carrington, you do me an injustice," he said; "you think too badly of the position altogether. I have never had a thought against your daughter's happiness—never one thought of doing her an injury. I have been very weak and foolish—your daughter has become a dear friend of mine—I have the most profound esteem for her; I would die rather than a word should be breathed against her."

"They are talking of her already; all the young women at the business—not one-half of them as good as she is—are picking her to pieces; they have torn her character to rags; they will speak of her soon in our street, where the story will come round sharp enough. Now you have done her all this harm, but you don't say how you propose to set it right."

"What can I do?"

"What Zeph told me you meant to do, what you have led her to expect all this while," said Mr. Carrington—"marry her."

"I would do it to-morrow if it were in my power, but it isn't," said Dudley.

"Meaning you are married already, perhaps?"

"No, I am not married. I am engaged. I—but I will write to your daughter. I will explain everything, and she will understand me and forgive me. For God's sake, leave me!" Dudley entreated. "I am wretched; don't you see that?"

"I don't care a damn for your wretchedness," said Mr. Carrington, bluntly. "What's it to me? What are you but a man who would have led my girl wrong if you could?"

"On my soul—no!"

"Pon my soul, yes!" cried Mr. Carrington. "These things don't stop when you like—it's all down hill—and you meant to drag her into the ditch at the bottom. It's the way of half of the devils of your sort that skulk about the streets to disgrace poor girls, whose ignorance makes it easy work. I have had your answer."

"Not yet. I will write a letter to Zeph at once."

"Don't trouble yourself," said her father; "I should not let her read it. I can go home and tell her in half a dozen words she was wrong and I was right in what we said of you this morning."

"No, no, don't tell her anything; pray let me write to her," urged Dudley.

"Are you going to say you will marry her?" Garrington asked as he rose.

"I am going to relate the whole story of my position—to explain to"—

"That'll do; I don't choose she shall see it, or see you ever again. Come, Ben, let us leave this gentleman," he said.

They walked slowly from the room; they went away without another word; and Dudley was thanking Heaven for their departure, when the flushed face of the father peered round the door again.

"I may as well tell you what I think of you before I go. I sha'n't be easy without," said Zeph's father.

"Spare me, please," replied Dudley, in feeble protest; "I think badly enough of myself, without your hard words. I know what you think of me—and have a right to think."

"I can't help saying—and I feel bound to say

it—you've acted like an infernal scoundrel from the first. That's all." And having expressed himself thus forcibly, Mr. Carrington went back with the news to poor Zeph.

CHAPTER VIII.

"POOR ZEPH."

YES, he would write to Zeph at once, thought Dudley. She would understand him better than the rest of them. He was judged too harshly by outsiders. The father, in cruder language, had only expressed the same opinion as Frank Amore. All his own fault; he owned it, and he deserved it. What right had he to be judged a better and more honorable man than ninety-nine out of a hundred placed in a similar position? What proof was there existent that he would not have harmed Zeph Carrington? And how much evidence was there that his course of action was not one of studied deception from the first?

Yes, he would write to Zeph.

He sat down before his desk and began; but the task was more difficult than he had imagined. It was impossible to explain his long course of deception, and constitute his love as an excuse for it. He dared not set down on paper that he had loved her desperately and foolishly, but there had never been in his thoughts an idea of making her his wife. He could not register cruelly in black and white that her position was beneath him, her friends and home surroundings altogether low, and that he was engaged to be married to another woman at the time he was raving of his affection for her. He was sure he loved Zeph passionately and unselfishly, and the sorrow at his heart for Zeph's sorrow was a weight which bore him down completely. He begged her not to judge him as her father had done, to think of his trouble even, to consider it was all for the best that they were about to part; and then the lines read so coldly and falsely that he ran his pen through them, and cursed the incompetency of expression by which he had been smitten.

He spent hours in writing letters, which he tore up as soon as he had written them, and finally he seized his hat and dashed into the fresh air in search of relief from the sick headache which oppressed him. But he could not remain in the streets with a letter unwritten which might bring a faint degree of solace to Zeph's heart if he could only say all that was in his thoughts more earnestly. He returned to his chambers, lighted his lamp, and had recommenced his miserable task, when a strange, soft knock at his door thrilled him with a horror for which there could be only one reason. Zeph had come to see him! to denounce his perfidy with her own white lips, to curse him for the blight which he had been to her life. He was sure it was she before he was standing in the doorway, looking out into the murky landing-place where Zeph was.

He had not been mistaken. She who came quickly toward him, with her hands extended and her anxious face uplifted for his kiss, was the poor little milliner who had altered his life and shipwrecked her own in trusting to him.

"Zeph, Zeph," he said, "you should not have come to see me here; you should have kept away, and waited for the letter I am writing to you."

"I could not wait, Dudley," she answered, listlessly. "What was the use of waiting? Let me come in and talk to you."

"But"—

"I am tired," she said. "I have been about the streets all day, looking at the shops and the carriages. I must rest a minute, Dudley."

It was a pale, haggard face at which he gazed, and there was something so depressing and awful in her steady stare at him that he hesitated still for her sake.

"I will come out with you," he said. "We will walk together in the Inn."

"Did not you hear me say I was tired?"

"Yes; but I should not like them to say you had come to my rooms," he said. "They may be watching you."

"Who are they?" asked Zeph, shortly.

"Your father, your friends."

"Never mind them. They know," she added,

with a short, hard laugh, "I am not too particular."

"Don't say that, even in jest."

"And I know I can trust you, Dudley. You are not the man to injure me?"

"God forbid!"

"Then let me come in, for I am very tired"—

She reeled as she spoke, and would have fallen to the ground had it not been for his plunge forward, which saved her by clasping his arms round her in his fright. He led her into his room, and while she sat in the big library chair he had recently quitted, he mixed some weak brandy and water for her.

"Here, drink this," said Dudley. "You have overtaxed your strength to-day. You have been greatly worried and traduced. It would have been better to remain quietly at home."

"Home!" she echoed, sorrowfully; "I haven't any."

"Great Heaven! what do you mean?"

"Any that I care about, I should say," she answered, as she drank from the glass which she set aside the instant afterward, with a visible shudder, and clasped her two ungloved hands tightly together in her lap.

"I am glad to see you, Zeph, for one reason out of many, although I would have preferred meeting you elsewhere," began Dudley. "I seem to have so much to say and to urge in my defense, if you will not reprove me too bitterly for all my weakness."

"I haven't cause to reproach you, Dudley," she said, with a sad smile. "It is all my fault, not yours."

"No, no; that is not true," cried Dudley. "You are not to blame. I should have known better. I have deceived you cruelly, but I could not help it."

"We could not help it, either of us," said Zeph, staring at the carpet. "It was Fate, wasn't it? I believe in Fate."

"Tell me first about your quarrel with your employers. What did they say about you and me?"

"Oh, don't bother," said Zeph, in reply. "What does it matter?"

"You are not reckless, Zeph?"

"N—no," was the half-hesitating answer.

"You are resigned to our parting from each other? You see it is best for both of us."

"Yes," she said, slowly; "perhaps it is."

"You will believe, too—oh! Zeph, you will believe—this is the bitterest day of my life. Don't think me a wretch and villain at any time. If it is not easy to forget me, don't think that," he cried.

"Did father say you were a villain?" she asked, almost unmoved by his excitement.

"Yes."

"Ah! he thinks so," she muttered. "When they told me at the business I was no better than I should be—when they told everybody that—he said it might be true for what he knew. He's very hard on us both. He's not a good father, Dudley."

"Don't think too hardly of the father, Zeph," said Dudley. "He had a right to speak."

"He said a lot about you I don't take in yet," continued Zeph, with her old sharpness of discourse apparent for an instant; "and that you were engaged to be married to a lady too. That's a lie, isn't it? If I'm too poor and common for you—if you have thought it over again, and seen the folly of it—I don't mind much. I won't be, after a while, so very, very down at losing you. But there is no other lady anywhere, is there, Dudley? Do tell me that."

She had woke up from her apathy at last, and was regarding her old lover with eyes gleaming and wide, her face full of a craving to be convinced that Dudley had loved her in real earnest through it all.

"My dear Zeph, it is true enough," he stammered, "I am engaged to be married; that is the shame and the remorse of it to me."

"I—I didn't think it was so bad," Zeph murmured.

"It is."

"Then why did you come after me?" she asked, curiously. "Why could not you let me be? I had never done you any harm."

The light died out of her face, and the gray

shadows stole back to it and deepened in their tone.

"Oh, Zeph, I did not think it would come to this!" said Dudley.

"I was happy in my way; it wasn't a good way, but laughing and talking at the Rooms didn't seem to matter much; but when you followed me, came to Keston," she added, thoughtfully, "met me week after week, night after night, made me your companion, took me everywhere, let me see you cared for me a little, why, what could I do but like you very much? O my God! what could I do?"

Dudley knew not how to answer. There was a strong impulse upon him to clasp this young woman to his breast, to speak words of consolation and affection to her, to bid her consider herself from that time forth his affianced wife; it seemed the only fair and honest reparation he could make. Heaven knew he loved her better than Geraldine, that he had never loved Geraldine at all, and Zeph had been so great a happiness of late days that he had preferred to lose his honor rather than lose her. But he was silent; the crisis had come, and it was wise policy to meet it firmly, though without the girl it seemed impossible then that he should ever know happiness again.

"Courage, Zeph, courage," he answered, in a low voice.

She went on in the same half-absent manner—a woman asking questions of herself rather than of him.

"If I could only understand why you took so much trouble, spent so much time on me, talked of being fond of me—if I could only make it all out!" she said; "but to go on like this, and then suddenly cast me off like an old glove, it's a riddle I can't guess; for it *was* all acting—wasn't it?"

"No, Zeph, it wasn't," he cried; "I never told you an untruth in my life. You were, and are, awfully dear to me; but for both our sakes we must say good-bye to each other."

"Now we are found out," she added, "I wonder what would have happened if nothing had been said about it?"

"I have been summoning courage to end this for weeks; I have been miserable concerning you."

"Only for weeks. Ah!" with a heavy sigh, "it was too late then."

"Zeph, dear Zeph, it is not too late," cried Dudley; "here is the turning-point of our lives. There is nothing for you to look back at with shame. You have been good and true and honest. You have no cause for regret; the disgrace of it rests with me."

"I have been a fool," said Zeph, bitterly. "I thought I was going to marry a gentleman, and I was silly enough to trust him."

"I have not abused your trust, Zeph."

"Oh, you have respected me, you mean," said Zeph. "I wish you had not."

"Good God!"

"It would have put me on my guard, and I should have got away before I cared for you," said Zeph; "I should have been frightened and run. There, I don't intend this for a reproach, Dudley; I said I had not come to say a word against you—I didn't mean—Forgive me. Now I know the truth," she said, rising to her feet, "I think I can say—good-bye—pretty well."

She turned grayer at the thought, however, and her eyes were full of that far-away look which had already scared him.

"You will go home, of course?" he asked.

"Yes; I will go home," she answered wearily.

"Making it up with your father—settling down quietly—seeing very quickly, I hope, how wise we were to-night in parting thus."

"Oh! I see that already," she said, quickly.

"Don't you fear?"

"And you will seek another situation at once?"

"Situation," she muttered.

"It will give you occupation and relief of mind."

"My character is gone, and no one will have me."

"It is not gone. I will"—

"You will do nothing, please," said Zeph; "I don't want to talk of this, or think of this, just now. It is good-bye I have come to say, that's all; and I can say it, and God bless you, too!"

"No, no; God bless you, and forgive me!" Dud-

ley cried, folding her in his arms, and kissing her passionately for the last time in his life.

She returned his caress, put her arms round his neck softly for an instant, and then went away dry-eyed, and with a slow, firm step. He watched her descend the stairs from the balusters, over which he leaned, but she did not look up at him again, although he cried good-bye to her once more, and she murmured back his words—an echo of despair that was deeper than his own.

When she was in the Inn again, and a few paces from the house, she came to a full stop. She turned and looked at the light behind the window-blind of his room. Had she been struck into stone, she could not have remained more silent and rigid in the night shadows that were about her there.

It was her last look. The dark curtain would fall between them forever after that, unless—What would he say, what would he do, if she toiled up those stairs again and told him that she could not go away, and it was cruel now to send her away, after all that had happened! But she did not move toward him—she stirred neither hand nor foot until a hand clutched her arm suddenly and roughly.

"Ben!" she faltered forth, as she became aware that it was her old admirer standing by her, with his fierce white face peering into hers.

"Yes, it is Ben, and no mistake."

"Have you been following me?" she asked, with a quaver of indignation in her voice.

"I have," was the reply. "I told your father I'd hang about till you came. He said you wouldn't come here, but I knew better. I knew what it all meant. Oh, yes—it wasn't easy to humbug me."

"Well," she said.

"And you've been in there," he shouted. "I've counted all the time you've been planning with him what to do, now the whole trick's blown upon."

"I don't know what to do," murmured the helpless Zeph.

"You've settled it all, no doubt."

"And I don't care what becomes of me," she added. "I don't, really."

"So that you get away from the gov'nor and me," cried Ben. "Of course not. He's nothin', I'm nothin', and that fellow's everythin'."

He shook his fist at the lighted windows of Dudley Grey's room.

"Shouldn't wonder if I didn't kill that man some day," he muttered, with an oath.

"Don't say that. It was all my fault."

"Oh, I don't excuse you," answered Ben.

"I don't ask you," she said, almost sharply, and in the old sharp way, and then the hollow voice came back again. "Where's father?"

"Waiting for me to tell him where you've been."

"And you'll tell him?"

"I'll tell him you're all that's bad, or you wouldn't have gone in there. I wish I'd dropped down stone-dead afore I'd seen you do it!" he exclaimed.

"He'll believe I'm wrong now, won't he, Ben?"

"Why shouldn't he?"

"Ah! why shouldn't he?" she said. "Good-bye."

"Ain't you coming home?" he asked a little curiously.

"I shall be home presently. I promised Mr. Grey I would go home."

Ben gave vent to another oath at this, and Zeph turned slowly from him and went along the Inn toward the Strand. He did not attempt to follow her; he went his own way, and in his own bitter spirit, to Mr. Carrington's house.

CHAPTER IX

"THE MORAL OF THE STORY."

THE weak, vain man who had once been so proud of his moral strength, was a stranger being than he was aware, or we have been able to depict to our readers in the faint sketch which we have attempted here. Although not an exceptional man, nor an uncommon specimen of humanity—only one of a sentimental order of beings who never mean ill, and work more mischief than those bolder sinners who march triumphantly along the

devil's road as though it led to glory—Dudley Grey was to an extent different from his class. He did not breathe freely after his romantic folly had collapsed, and the parting had taken place, and all was over for good. He was a man who had not completely made up his mind to part with Zeph, he found out. He had been touched to the quick by her grief and love for him; her despairing face haunted him still. He had shadowed her life for all time. He had taught her never to trust in his sex again, and he had set the tongues of scandal hissing at her with the worst construction of her dangerous acquaintance with him. She was so eccentric a girl that he was afraid of the result; she did not look at life defiantly or proudly now; he had struck down even her self-confidence; he had driven her mad by his own cowardice and reserve. She had been so good a girl until his sickly sentiment had turned her head.

The end had come, and they had said good-bye. He was never to meet her again, to kiss her, to hear her crisp, merry laugh ringing like a peal of sweet bells in his ears, and her big eyes were never to light up again with pleasure at the sight of him. They would pass each other in the street presently, souls divided and drifting away.

If he should go back to her! It was infatuation—there was insanity in it. There was social suicide, the contempt and laughter of his own world; but there was Zeph wretched, and he loved her. Yes, he had played with fire until his wings were scorched, and the consciousness of her grief was already insupportable to bear. He could not be happy without her; he was sure of it. He should be utterly miserable with the woman to whom his honor was pledged, and make her life a misery. He could only brighten the life of the girl who had left him; he would do it, by the help of Heaven—he would do his best at last!

What were class distinctions, and the howl of gentility at his defiance of them, to Zeph and Zeph's love for him? His mind was made up an hour after she had left him—completely made up. He sat down and dashed off a few wild lines to Geraldine, acknowledging his unworthiness, surrendering his claim to her, referring her to Frank Amore for the explanation of his conduct, for which he begged forgiveness very earnestly, and then he went out into the streets and dropped his letter into the pillar-box with a strong, firm hand.

"Thank God, I have made up my mind at last!" he said. "I do Geraldine more justice by resigning her and accepting her scorn of me, and I save my dear, dear Zeph all further bitterness."

He walked up and down the street considering this, he had no intention of returning to his chambers yet; he was unsettled, but far happier in his mind than he had been of late days.

Why had he not done this before, he wondered now, and saved all the heart-burning and all the pangs of conscience by which he had been beset? Why had his miserable pride stood in the way of making Zeph happy? And he had coolly thought of loving one woman and marrying another? Thank God, he could change Zeph's life as in a fairy tale by the potent spell of his honest heart-felt words, and Zeph's father and friends, and even Ben, would become tolerable in time. If he lost caste, he should have done his duty, and he should be content in his lower estate—nothing could be more certain than that—with Zeph Carrington loving him so well. He would proceed immediately to Zeph's father's house and recover lost ground as soon as possible. He would bring the smiles back to that poor white face of Zeph's, and there should never be anything save peace and rest upon it again. She was sitting at home, miserable and despairing, and he must hasten with the news that he loved her too well to say good-bye to her. That was not a parting forever which had occurred a little while ago in his dusty room at Clement's Inn—only a scene in a comedy, leading up to this, and they would look back at it presently and smile at their fears and regrets, as at an interesting love story that had ended pleasantly. She would make him a good wife; she was an affectionate, tractable, docile girl, shrewd enough to catch quickly the manners and customs of society, never a woman of whom he should feel ashamed. A month or two with him would make a lady of her, and those who knew her history even would not marvel

at his choice. There was more real love in the world than skeptics asserted, and so much the better for the world.

He strode on, with his brain full of thoughts akin to these, until, at the corner of a cross street on his way to Zeph's house, he came to a full stop. A stone's throw distance from him rose the huge brick front of a metropolitan hospital, and there Frank Amore worked in the good cause and dreamed of future fame in a world of surgery.

He should not have thought of Frank Amore on that occasion had it not been for the knots of idlers about the doors and on the pavement and in the roadway, and in noticing them his friend came to his mind. He would tell Frank what a revolution had occurred in his thoughts, and what a better man he had become as by a miracle. It would not take five minutes to relate, and he should be amused—actually amused—by Frank's stare of incredulity and astonishment. This Amore was a man of the world, cool, calculating and high principled; what would he say to him in the face of a resolve from which nothing could turn him? Frank would tell him he had acted very unwisely—everybody would tell him that—but he could say never again he was behaving badly to both women and leading the poorer on to her ruin. Frank would talk in his worldly-wise style for a time, but he would thaw by degrees from the inner warmth of his heart, and wish him at last every happiness in his choice. And presently—Dudley actually laughed at the idea, so full of life and light thoughts was he now that honorable course of action lay before him—Frank Amore would begin to pay attention to Geraldine de Courcy, and marry her in good time, and live happily ever afterward, though he would never know what was the deep happiness of an unselfish passion like his own. That would be reserved for one who had sunk his chances to save breaking the heart of a girl in a back street.

He crossed to the hospital and paused again. Perhaps Frank was busy. There had been "a case" in during the last few minutes, and the crowd had not dispersed yet. Jackson, the porter, was chasing one or two boys down the steps as Dudley went toward him. Dudley Grey was well known as a visitor to the surgeon's quarters, and the porter touched his hat as he came up.

"Is Mr. Amore in?"

"Yes, sir."

"And busy, perhaps?"

"No, sir, not at all."

"Oh, I thought by the crowd"—

"I suppose they're waiting for the body to come out again—for they've brought it in an hour too late—that's all. They've no right," said the porter, very much aggrieved, "to keep bringing their stale stiff uns here. We can't cure them things."

"We couldn't help it, I s'pose," said a surly-looking man in blue serge jacket, who stepped from the hospital as the porter spoke. "I'll swear she breathed when Bill and I fished her out of the water."

"You'd swear to anything," said the porter, laughing with the easy complacency of a man accustomed to tragedy toiling up the broad stone steps all day. "I suppose you heard her dying speech and confession, too, and what she did it for?"

"That's easy guessing," muttered the man; "it's all one tale that takes gals to the river."

"Ay, that's true," said the porter, "and"—

"Let me pass," said Dudley, pushing by them roughly. "Where's Amore? I must see him. Don't stand in the way. I"—

He dashed into the great central hall, where a few students were congregated, and some hard-featured working-men were preparing to depart with their draped and rigid burden to the parish dead-house. Frank Amore was crossing the hall in haste, when his friend screamed forth his name. The young surgeon paused, turned very pale, and came to him with an angry frown upon his face.

"Good God! Dudley, why have you followed on like this?" he asked, sternly. "What's the use of it, save to attract attention, and make more misery and scandal?"

"It is, then—it was"—Dudley could say no more, but remained dumb and horror-stricken, with his hand pointing to the litter which the men were raising to their shoulders.

"Yes—it was the girl you called Zeph," said the surgeon. "What did I tell you long ago?"

Otherwise folks are proud of their prophecies, and it is a moment of triumph when they can shout forth to the weaklings, "What did we tell you?" But this vain, weak, willful Dudley Grey had closed his eyes at the mention of Zeph's name, and dropped like a dead man at the feet of his friend.

"Don't press round too much, gentlemen," said Amore, bending over Dudley at once, and waving back the students. "It's a little shock to the system, a mere faint—that's all. Unfasten his neck-tie; he will be better in a minute." Then he looked round in a scared and excited way himself, and waved his hand toward the group of bearers in the background. "Take it away—quick!"

And as Dudley Grey came to himself, and glared into the face of his friend, poor Zeph was carried out into the night.

THE END.



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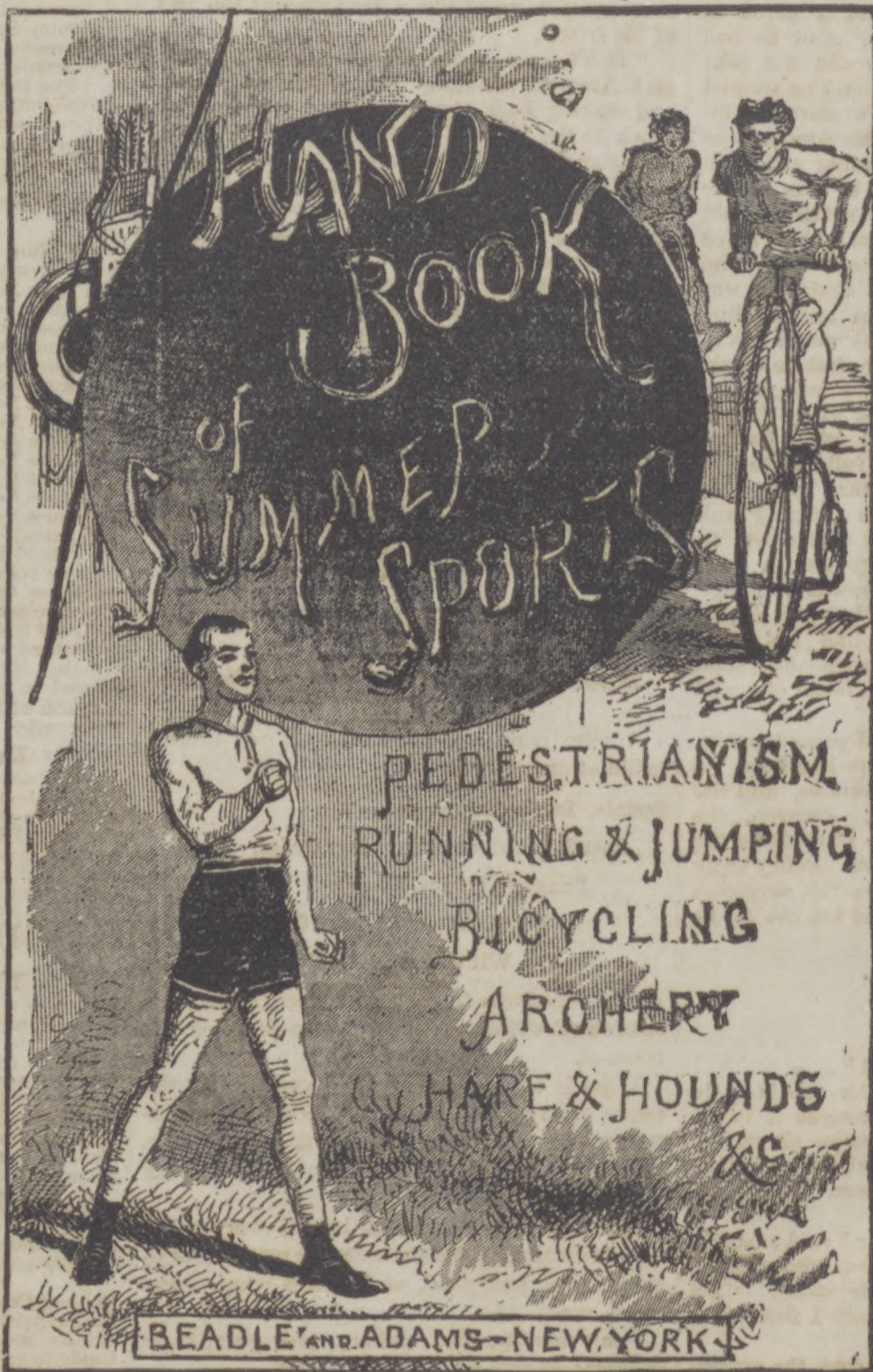
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